



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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No Two Actuaries Are Created Equal

by Paula Hodges

As with the general population, every actuary is unique, and each of us has personal preferences, passions and interests. Then **why is it that we expect our staff, and ourselves, to fit into the mold of a specific job definition?** Our management defines business objectives, creates jobs to fulfill those objectives, and then hires people to do them. Sometimes the fit is great. Other times—not so great.

But let me ask another question: Do you ever have a work day that just flies by? You feel fulfilled; you give the company your best; you get a tremendous amount of work done; people appreciate what you do. You love your job, you contribute your best, and the company's objectives are met because you are in the right spot at the right time, and your strengths and talents are just what they need. This doesn't have to be a dream. And, you can include your entire team in this dream!

The key is to mold your job and workday around your strengths and the strengths of the people on your team. To illustrate how this might work, let's meet Tim and Mary.

Case Study:

Tim has been a product actuary for 12 years. He's involved in product design, pricing and also helps with some of the details of product implementation. As part of his work, he's required to "pitch" his ideas to the department management and the marketing folks. Mary works side-by-side with Tim. She has virtually the same responsibilities and experience level. However, they are very different individuals.

Tim has noticed that there are days when he has to drag himself into work. These are the days when he's got the major product design fleshed out, he's got a good picture of what the market needs, he's built the base model in the software,

but now he has to deal with multiple pricing runs to fine-tune the balance between profitability and marketability. What a drag!! Tim is a "starter" and likes to get the project underway. He has the vision to pull vague concepts together to set the direction of the project, but doesn't take any pleasure in refining the details.

Mary, on the other hand, is at her best when she gets called upon to assist in a project that needs "saving". When time pressures are mounting on a project, and she is called on to help crunch the numbers out, Mary excels in her work and feels great about her contributions. She feels as though she's molding a masterpiece when she's able to orchestrate the delicate financial balance between the needs of the corporation, the agent and the client. She's also very articulate in presenting the finished product to the other departments who require training. Just don't ask Mary to initiate a new project, because she despises the interviewing and the drawn-out process to get started. She wants to just jump in and get going!

When we first meet Mary and Tim, they have the same responsibilities, since they are at the same level in the organization and have the same title. But since they are both being asked to do the design, pricing and implementation of a product from cradle-to-grave, they are both feeling as though they are performing at less than their best during certain stages of the process and are feeling burnt-out.

Taking a lunch break one day, they start comparing notes on what they love and hate about their work. Of course, in this very contrived situation, it turns out that Tim dreads the type of work that Mary absolutely loves to do, and vice versa! They meet with their management, talk about how they can restructure their work to build products as a team and voila!! Instant job satisfaction!

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Of course, life is never that simple, and we generally don't have a "Tim" or "Mary" in the office to take on all the work that we don't like doing. However, there are incremental steps you can take to get more enjoyment out of the job you have now, or to identify what type of job you should be looking for.

Finding Your Strengths

- 1) The first step is to take a personal diary of a typical work week. Keep a list of the times when you're really enjoying what you're doing at the moment, and another list of times when you'd rather be doing something else.
- 2) At the end of the week, look for patterns in what you put in each list. Think about why you enjoyed (or didn't enjoy) the particular activity, whether it was with certain types of people (peers, customers, management, other departments), the time of day, and the activity itself.
- 3) Now write it down. Put it in the format of a statement that describes your strengths. You'll want to capture about three strengths statements and three weakness statements. Make sure you are clear on the details. There is immense power in writing something down—this makes it real—and makes it into a personal goal.
- 4) Find ways to spend more time doing what you love each week, and less time doing what is on the other list. You can make some changes to your work on your own, by simply being aware of subtle ways that you operate each day. In other cases, you might want to have a conversation with your manager to discuss how your strengths can improve your work product. Let him/her know that you'd like to spend more time doing those

things at which you're operating at your peak performance.

- 5) In addition, pay attention to what others' strengths are. Chances are that someone else's strengths will complement yours or your teammates'. Watch for these, to make sure that everyone is able to contribute their best.

Finally, try to recognize that we are all individuals. No two people will get job satisfaction in the same way. Take some time to understand what you can do best, and what your team members do best. By understanding the individual, you will improve performance, job satisfaction and also team dynamics.

To get a whole host of strategies to help you build upon your strengths, I recommend the book: *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, by Marcus Buckingham. Enjoy! □



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