



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

August 2013 – Issue 51

The Secret Lives of Actuaries

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Editor's Note: Here is a light-hearted look at the high ranking of actuarial jobs, and what wisdom one might take from that in considering career choices.

The genie is out of the bottle! Ever since the job of actuary took the No. 1 position in *CareerCast.com*'s list of the top 10 jobs in the United States, actuaries have been taking bows amidst a frenzy of tweeting about their new status. Along with the kudos, people are debating the criteria used, the results, and the relevancy, all of which pleases this career coach, who believes career introspection is a good thing. The big question is:

HOW HAS THIS KNOWLEDGE BEEN KEPT SECRET FOR SO LONG?

Conspiracy theorists suspect a plot by the 1 percent to keep others in the dark about these lucrative, no-stress jobs that are purportedly going begging.

The list garnered a great deal of curiosity about the profession from unexpected quarters. My brother-in-law, who owns a Maui-based whale watching, snorkeling and fishing trip company, asked if there were many salt-water opportunities for actuaries. My son-in-law in Cody, Wyo., who is a qualified hunting guide, steer roper, horse trainer and blacksmith (as well as the primary childcare provider in his family), asked if there is any seasonal demand for actuaries in between the hay harvesting and mountain lion hunting seasons.

WHAT AM I, CHOPPED LIVER?

Thousands of people whose jobs didn't appear on CareerCast's list of 200 ranked jobs were decidedly miffed. An indignant employee of the Perdue company called foul, while an anonymous caller from an incandescent light bulb maker said that while prospects for his industry were admittedly dim, it hurt to be excluded.

SO WHAT DO ACTUARIES THINK ABOUT BEING "NUMERO UNO"?

While many gracefully acknowledged what they saw as long-overdue recognition, not all waxed poetic about their jobs. Nor did all of them agree that the job of actuary deserves such a high rating, given the five ranking criteria: **low physical demands, good work environment, high income potential, generally low stress and positive hiring outlook.**

While one actuary thought the average pay was **underestimated**, protesting that no 30-year-old actuary he knows of makes less than six figures, another said that, in reality, competition had brought salaries down in recent years. In fact, the competition for jobs as an actuary is fierce. As for stress, one dissenter said, "If you're an actuary and you think your job is low stress, please tell me where you work." Yet another said, "I have been working 50- to 60-hour weeks for 25 years and it is very stressful—clients are demanding; travel is frustrating."

Others pointed out that the algorithm omitted the cost, time and effort required for even an entry-level position as an actuary, much less the effort required to obtain multiple certifications and to reach the top of the profession.

All of the above comments point to the importance of getting multiple opinions when it comes to life-changing decisions like choosing a career.

SELECTION CRITERIA: HOW MANY AND WHICH ONES?

No consensus could be reached on the ideal criteria for ranking jobs, or even how **many** criteria were required. Conservatives insisted that **any** job, paid or unpaid, was a foot in the door and a hand up. Next in the easiest-to-please department were mercenaries, who failed to see the value of more than one criterion. A follower of Eckhart Tolle¹ submitted that any job that paid minimum wage and didn't require one to appear naked in public was a good job.

Speculation is running rampant as to the identity of the person who selected the criteria, with only a few clues to be sleuthed:

- S/he is not fond of the outdoors, because central air conditioning appeared to be an underlying, if not explicit, criterion.
- The mystery person may be physically frail or small in stature, since physically undemanding was another criterion.
- Said person may have a germ phobia, since any job that entailed getting one's hands dirty appeared to rank as a bad job.

Chocoholics.com emphatically declared that a job that didn't include chocolate couldn't possibly be among the top 10 in the United States. The local Charlotte restaurant critic sniffed at an ideal job that didn't include gustatory pleasures. One sour green grape whined that none of the leader board work environments included the great outdoors. Golfers and forest rangers everywhere concurred. No comments were heard from the ranks of America's more than 800,000 volunteer firefighters. Guess they were too busy saving lives.

The criteria were also perplexing to small business owners, many of whom choose to work 70 hours a week for themselves, in order to avoid working 40 hours for someone else.

AN ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY

Rather than ranking jobs by an arbitrary set of job characteristics, life coaches like to focus on how a job makes a person **feel**. After a six-month job search and career change, one woman declared, "I feel like I died and went to heaven." Another question you might ask yourself when pondering your ideal job is what you would do if money were not a concern and no one else were watching—no family, no friends, no community to please or impress.

ONE PERSON'S TRASH IS ANOTHER'S TREASURE

Perhaps the most interesting comments on CareerCast's site were from the other end of the spectrum—those who held the "worst jobs in

America." Many of these workers protested that salaries in their fields were grossly underestimated or that they had jobs "you can't beat." It seems that CareerCast's compensation figures were taken from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and don't include non-monetary benefits like 200 hours of vacation and 100 hours of sick leave (postal worker); six months on and six months off (oil rig worker); 30 days a year vacation, tax-free housing, subsidized shopping, special pay (enlisted military personnel); and extraordinary health and retirement benefits (all government workers). The lesson here is not to forget to include benefits when comparing job or career opportunities.

Notably, for every one of the 10 worst jobs (except news reporter, which ranked dead last) there was someone who challenged the ranking, believing their job deserved a significant upgrade.

MAKING A LIST AND CHECKING IT TWICE

Finding a job you love is a lot like finding true love. It's best to have a clear idea of what constitutes "good, better, best" well **before** entering a relationship—preferably when you're not under duress. Stress is responsible for a lot of bad decision making in all areas of our lives. Ask yourself which qualities are must-haves and which would be icing on the cake and why. That's one way to end up with an intentional, rather than an accidental, career.

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

Those who complained about their jobs received little sympathy from others. One psychic detective remarked that the article about worst jobs was obviously a case of the writer feeling sorry for himself. Another commenter with crabby genes rified on liberal arts majors who "followed their bliss" without adequately researching job opportunities.

If you make a mistake, my advice is to take the LIFO approach to jobs—last in, first out; start planning your exit strategy. The good thing is that it's a lot easier to leave a job, a company, an industry, or even a profession than it is to leave a significant other.

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BEAUTY IS IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

CareerCast's list highlights the fact that there are no good jobs or bad jobs. There are only bad choices. As with a soul mate, the most important criteria are your personal values.

Make sure your values are shared by the company you work for, the partners you work with, and the employees who work for you. And while the value of face-to-face discussions can't be overestimated, there's a place for anonymous comments, as well; sometimes the truth burns brighter when the torch holder remains in the shadows.

JOB SEARCH AND CAREER TAKEAWAYS

Whether you're considering a career change or studying for your first actuarial exam, speak to as many people as possible to get a comprehensive picture of what a job is really like and how it

relates to your personal likes, dislikes, talents, skills, experience, and most of all, values. While "meaningful" is different for each of us, and may change over time, without personal job satisfaction, it doesn't much matter how great **other** people think your job is. If you believe in what you're doing and the value of the product or service your company provides, then you're probably among those happy people like me, who believe they have one of the top 10 jobs in the world. ●

ENDNOTES

¹ Author of *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*, and listed by the *Watkins Review* in 2011 as the most spiritually influential person in the world.