



Article from

Actuary of the Future

November 2018

Issue 43

Interview With Jennie McGinnis

Transcribed by Mitchell Tamashunas



Jennie McGinnis, FSA, CERA, MAAA

Actuary of the Future recently had the pleasure of interviewing Jennie McGinnis, FSA, CERA, MAAA, SVP of Swiss Re, about her perspectives on career development, industry trends and Society of the Actuaries (SOA) service. This transcription includes many great insights and advice that is especially interesting to readers who have not yet listened to the podcast.

Mitchell Tamashunas: Welcome to the Society of Actuaries' Actuary of the Future podcast, sponsored by the Actuary of the Future [Section]. My name is Mitch Tamashunas, and I'm currently a student at the University of Iowa. During today's podcast, we're going to be talking about reinsurance and getting involved in the SOA. To help us do that, we'll be talking to Jennie McGinnis, who is a senior vice president at Swiss Reinsurance. Jennie, thank you for joining us.

Jennie McGinnis: Happy to be with you today.

MT: To jump right in, can you tell us a little about your background?

JM: Sure. So, I actually took a while to find the actuarial profession. It ended up being my third major in undergrad. Through all of those choices, what I was really in search of was a way to practically apply math concepts. So, I was very happy once I discovered actuarial science. But, given that I found it a bit late during my undergrad, I ended up pursuing a master's degree for reasons of supporting my actuarial knowledge, but also because of other aspirations too. I have been with Swiss Re since I graduated, following internships with both a direct [insurer] and a consulting firm. Also, this year I'm celebrating the 10th anniversary of having earned my FSA and CERA designations.

MT: Great, and what's been your career progression so far?

JM: Swiss Re has a rotation program and I was able to take advantage of that. On top of that, because of some organizational changes along the way, it meant that I didn't necessarily stay in one rotating spot for all that long. Through the first half of my career, I held positions in pricing, new business development, as a project manager and as the lead for the U.S. valuation modeling team. This was all before I started focusing on in-force management.

I've been in in-force management for just over five years, which is quite a difference from all that movement that I had initially. However, within the in-force management team, I've grown my responsibilities over time. I started in a role that supported people making decisions within the team [I was in]. I began to carve out certain paths that I was responsible for, now being a portfolio manager myself. This means taking the lead in setting the direction of the team and ensuring the performance for a large part of our books. While some of that work is to protect performance, the really exciting part is coming up with new solutions that can help us and our clients improve performance, and ultimately support policyholders even better.

I've also been able to participate in some really enjoyable side projects during this time. A couple of examples that were really meaningful for me have been to lead branding and communication efforts for regional divisions and being part of a project to update our global life and health strategy.

MT: Great, thank you. So, you said you joined Swiss Re right out of college. Why did you choose to work in reinsurance?

JM: At the time that I was looking for a full-time position, it just seemed to be the right mix of both the direct company and consulting-type work. As I said, I had a chance to try out both of those through internships. I'd say that since coming into reinsurance, my experience has matched that, where I've had a bit of both. It's not to say that you couldn't have that same

mix at a different kind of firm, but I've really been able to find ways to connect to the products themselves, be able to advise on solutions and also to be able to really implement those solutions as well.

MT: Thank you. And now I will pass it on to Harsh Shah, who will talk to you a little bit more specifically about your work in reinsurance.

Harsh Shah: Hi, Jennie. ... I also work in reinsurance. So, I was curious, you mentioned a little bit about how your work differs from a direct insurer or a consulting company. Can you expand a little bit more on how the work at a reinsurance company, for someone coming into the profession, would be different?

JM: So, that's a really interesting question, and I don't know that the work or the tasks themselves vary all that much, but one aspect that I think certainly is different is just how close you are to the ultimate consumer. So, as a reinsurer, we have a theory about how doing something different might incent a certain policyholder behavior, say to keep their policy for longer. We can't just go make net change; we need to partner with a direct company to do something like that. On the other hand, if I were at a direct company considering a similar change, we could make a change like that. However, there'd be some real value in consulting with a reinsurer to tap into their broad data set and their knowledge about the market in general.

HS: Yes, I agree. That's also similar to what I have been noticing. I've seen that at a direct insurer, you have a little more focus or strategy to reach out to the consumer market, whereas, with reinsurers, it's more business to business. This is also true since we're working a lot more with other companies rather than people or regular consumers.

So, changing my train of thought, over the past 10 years, what's the biggest change you've seen in the actuarial industry and how do you think actuaries have had to develop themselves to adapt to this change?

JM: That's a little bit more difficult for me because it's really hard to identify one big change. I think a lot of changes actually happen incrementally. Because of this, it's hard to be able to pick up on a huge, quick shift. Rather, I would focus in on the second part of the question, which is to say how to really adapt to stay relevant in an everchanging world. For me, I really focus on three things: communication, decision-making and technology.

On the communication front, I think there's an obvious stereotype that actuaries can do the math but can't talk about it or explain what it all means. That leads into decision-making.

Actuaries have roles not only in helping people make decisions based on the analysis they have done, but also have opportunities to be in roles where they themselves really are key decision-makers. I think both of those concepts are made more interesting by the changing technological landscape. As our tools and systems change, the methods we use change. Predictive analytics, for example, becomes more and more important. There's an adaptation needed to know how to use the new methods certainly, but then—back to my previous themes—I think that there's just as importantly a question about how we help our stakeholders see through what might be considered a black box. None of these are issues that can be addressed or are adaptations that can take place overnight. However, I think there's still something to be said for continuous development to make sure we don't find ourselves left in the dust.

HS: I definitely agree with what you said about continuous development. I think that's how you stay relevant. So, using that thought process and building on top of it, looking into the future, what are a few big changes you anticipate happening in the industry in the next 10 years, and do you see actuaries having to develop a different set of skills to stay relevant?

JM: So, now I have to take back my answer about things not being so big and incremental. But, in terms of the next 10 years, my eyes are really on technological changes. Specifically, those that create opportunities to enhance the whole entire insurance process. So, how do you help people get life insurance coverage faster? Are they willing to use that process if it means that they are giving up some of their privacy? How do you more quickly react to people's needs as they change? Does that freak them out that you happen to know and recognize that their needs are changing? There are product designs and aspects that answer the questions that I've just asked, and actuaries certainly play a part of that. How do you develop these products? What do they look like? How do they move and change in that environment?

I think the other consideration is, what if we don't answer these questions? As a profession, what happens is another profession steps in [that] can address these questions. For the company that you're working for, what if others find a way to do these things and you don't, and you're left with much less business? Or maybe you have business, but it ends up leaving you with an unbalanced portfolio of risks? So, as technology changes, the questions we have to ask will change too, but hopefully we'll be able to come up with answers for all of these changing questions and environments.

HS: I absolutely agree, and I know a lot of people are working on making sure that that happens at the moment. So, from your experience, is there a trend that you've seen that impacted the reinsurance industry specifically? Something

that the direct insurer might not have seen or have impacted them as much?

JM: So, what comes to mind for me is actually an ongoing question, and it's a question that affects the direct insurance company too, just a little differently. The question is: How do we grow our business? For a direct company, they'd be considering that question with respect to policyholders; a reinsurance company will be considering it with respect to the amount of risk that is out there that needs reinsurance coverage. This goes to my earlier comment about one way of having the need for more reinsurance coverage is to ensure that there is a larger insurance pool. But what about contacting and working with the policyholders? That really needs to be done in partnership with a direct insurance company.

So, if I think about how we grow our business otherwise, I would say that another example is if there is an active M&A [mergers and acquisitions] market among direct companies that will result in companies that are larger and more capable of managing larger lines of risk themselves. In which case, the reinsurer needs to ask themselves, how do we continue to provide value? I think part of that question is answered by considering the risk profile of this new resulting direct company, how that changed, whether it creates new opportunities. I would also say, working in in-force management, I see the questions answered often in part by considering

what arrangements are already in place and how those can be modified, rather than strictly thinking about how to get what would be properly called "new" business. Is there another way? How can you draw even more value out of what we already have?

HS: Agreed. Thank you very much for speaking to me about the reinsurance side and also how you foresee changes in the actuarial industry. At this point, though, I want to pass it off to Paul, who will speak with you a little bit more about your career.

Paul Birch: Hi, Jennie. It's so nice to get the chance to talk to you. ... I'm a student at Penn State. So, talking with you so far, it's clear you have a number of great experiences and successes throughout your career. However, I also wanted to talk to you about challenges you've faced throughout your career. So, what would you say has been your biggest challenge throughout your career, and what did you have to do to overcome it?

JM: Thanks, Paul. That's a big question to think about. I'd say for me, the biggest challenge has really been the transition into leadership and, through that process, trying to hold together what I'll call "two identities." One as an actuary and one more generally as a business person. When I first started working, I leaned into some of my training in communications—because I



was a communications minor—in order to try and differentiate myself from other actuarial students. As I started taking on roles that weren't strictly actuarial, I found myself looking for ways to try to lean into and come back toward my actuarial technical training, to be able to differentiate myself from others around the organization. And to be fair, I don't know if this is something that I can ever really overcome, or anybody can overcome. I think it's something to be aware of, to grow into and get used to. In particular, I think it's important to recognize when one aspect, characteristic or strength of yours is really more valuable to a group than another.

To say it a different way, sometimes it's more important and valuable to the team that I'm working with for me to be more technical. It might still be at the same company, but with another group it might be much more important for me to lean into my communications skills and those abilities. So, really, it just comes down to knowing what situation you're in, and which of these strengths or skills are most valuable at that time.

PB: That sounds like a really great lesson, Jennie. Especially learning how to recognize your own skills to maximize your value in any position. I'm glad you've been able to continue to overcome that and to take on some great leadership positions. Having taken on leadership positions in your career, what have you found to be the benefits of staying at one company throughout your entire career?

JM: This is an interesting question, too. Especially from the perspective of it being common for people to change roles or companies more often nowadays. For me, I would say two things come to mind. First is having that variety of experience without having to relocate or learn a new corporate culture, or other similar changes that would come with changing companies. Aside from that, I would say being able to continuously grow and enhance my abilities to connect the dots across the organization that I am in. Even that has two aspects, too. One is just understanding what the business is, how it works, how it operates more broadly. But the second is being able to understand the people that I'm working with, understand how people prefer to work and operate across the organization and globe. And, to leverage all that into building a really solid network.

PB: That sounds great, Jennie. It sounds like it's a really nice mix of both variety and familiarity. I'm glad that's been working well for you. So, outside Swiss Re, you've also had some active roles in the SOA. Can you talk a little bit about each of the positions you've held in the SOA? Specifically, how you got them and what they entailed.

JM: Absolutely. This is a very important component of my career in its development so far that we really haven't touched

on. I started volunteering right around the time that I got my FSA. I've progressively taken on new roles and challenges in the SOA, similar to the way that I've taken on new roles and challenges within Swiss Re.

So, I think the first thing that I got involved in was when somebody asked me to. That was to get involved in a webcast. That led to being encouraged to run for, and ultimately being elected to, the Actuary of the Future Section Council. As part of that role, I focused on professional development opportunities. This means planning meeting sessions [and] continuing to work on webcasts, and I was also the chair of the council during my third year. During that time, we also established the role of the Section Council intern, so it's really such a pleasure to be able to talk to you guys, as the Section Council interns, and know that this is something we did that has really lasted.

Around the same time that I was on the AOF Council, the SOA created the Professional Development Committee. I was selected to represent the special interest sections [which includes the AOF]. Actually, one of our first actions as the Professional Development Committee was to start offering podcasts. Again, this has just been such a great experience to be able to see one more thing that has lasted. I also ultimately served as the chair of the Professional Development Committee. It was following that term that I was elected to the board. My board responsibilities continued on the thread of professional development, but I also began picking up responsibilities related to strategy for the organization. Also, I had board and leadership development responsibilities.

I think it's worth mentioning too that on both sides of my board experience, just before joining the board and the last year of my board term, I served on two different strategic-planning task forces. Those are really eye-opening experiences for me from the perspective of trying to think more broadly: to see outside ourselves, to really consider what's going on in the market and the environment that can have an impact on actuaries. And, not only think about what it could mean for us, but ultimately to set a direction for how we react to, or address, these things that are changing around us.

It's been about a year now since I've rolled off the board. I've stayed involved in governance work, and that's really focused on how the SOA is structured, how decisions are made within that structure, and thinking about the structure and decision-making process, and how those can be made more effective.

I've more recently been focused on launching a subgroup within the Product Development Section that focuses on supporting people who practice in the area of in-force management. We are in the very early stages of that, but we already have a very solid

agenda planned for this year. All in all, I have to say volunteering with the SOA has been a fabulous way to develop both personally and professionally.

PB: That sure sounds like a great experience, Jennie. It's so neat that it's come full circle working with the interns for this podcast. Thanks so much for giving us the opportunities to do these things. Looking at some aspiring actuaries or young actuaries who are listening to this, what would you say are the best ways to become involved in the SOA, and what are some of the rewards that come with becoming involved in professional [section] councils?

JM: That's a very good, practical question. So, in terms of how to become involved, there's really two ways. You can reach out or you can have someone tap into you. I was lucky that I already had a network where someone tapped me and invited me to participate. But, I would have to encourage young actuaries who are trying to grow their network to reach out. Now, if you're still taking exams, there are certain volunteer roles within the SOA that won't be open to you quite yet. That's not to say that there aren't roles available; some are. The SOA has a volunteer database that has a way of identifying roles that are already available that you might fit, but also a way of "raising your hand" and saying that you'd be interested. To have the SOA essentially help you look for ways to fit in is fantastic.

So, in terms of the rewards of becoming engaged, I would say largely it goes to developing a network. I had the chance to speak about the value of developing a network within my firm, but I can't say how much more powerful it is to have that network across the industry. Also, I want to come back to my comment about volunteering helping me develop both personally and professionally. As I think about the different roles that I've had volunteering at the SOA, there's several I can draw a line between showing that I am capable of doing certain things. As I showed that I was capable of doing things within the SOA volunteering structure, I then used that to show my employer, "See, I can do this, so now what's the next challenge within the



workplace to do?" I think that even goes back and forth a little, so if you develop at your employer, then you have the chance to then bring that back to the SOA too. You can see your leadership roles grow there too.

PB: That's great to hear, Jennie. Thanks so much for helping inform us of how we can all continue to be involved in such rewarding enterprises. That wraps it up for today's podcast. This is Paul Birch thanking you for tuning in. We hope that you have gotten a lot out of our discussion today. I also want to thank Jennie McGinnis for joining us. Jennie, it was great talking to you today.

JM: It was a pleasure to spend time with all of you.

PB: We hope you can join us again soon for another SOA Actuary of the Future podcast. ■



Mitchell Tamashunas is currently a senior at the University of Iowa, majoring in statistics and earning a Risk Management and Insurance certificate. He can be reached at mitchbtam@gmail.com.