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Advice From an Actuary: Interview With Suzanna-Grace Sayre

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Suzanna-Grace Sayre, FSA, CERA, MAAA

We have a strong mentorship program at my company, Wakely Consulting, where each employee is assigned a MAC (manager, advocate and coach). Your MAC is tasked with helping you manage your workload, advocating for you at the end of the year, and coaching you to develop professionally, both short term and long term. I've found my participation in the MAC program invaluable, and I encourage all aspiring actuaries to make a connection with someone a few years your senior to develop yourself professionally.

As I am developing my career, I have access to the experience of my MAC. In the spirit of leveraging that experience and sharing knowledge, I sat down with my MAC, Suzanna-Grace Sayre, FSA, CERA, MAAA, and asked her a few questions about her career path and any advice she has to share with aspiring actuaries.

Tim van Laarhoven: How long have you been an actuary?

Suzanna-Grace Sayre: I've been working in the actuarial field since 2003, and I earned my first credential in 2005 when I got my ASA.

TVL: Could you talk a little bit about how you got to your current position?

S-GS: I've taken a more winding career path than most. I started in a pension department at an insurance company, and then moved over to life and annuities after a few years. I then moved to a different insurance company and worked in a reporting role for their Latin America division, providing quarterly estimates of economic capital and quantifying various business risks. I was there from 2007 to 2009, a time when the organization became hyper-aware of the risks in their portfolio. My next position was a complete shift, over to the health care side. I worked at a health plan in Albuquerque, New Mexico, supporting their Medicare and Medicaid programs. I discovered that I really enjoy working in health care and have been working in these areas ever since.

TVL: What do you work on at Wakely?

S-GS: One great thing about Wakely is that I get to work on a variety of projects. Every day is a little different. Recently, some of my more interesting projects have involved the Kentucky Medicaid Section 1115 waiver. We've worked with the state to create a cost-effectiveness tool that estimates the cost of a Medicaid member enrolling in an employer-sponsored insurance plan, with member premium and cost share covered by the Medicaid program. I've also assisted Kentucky with the creation of a medically frail program, which is designed to identify high-risk members and ensure they continue to receive the coverage and care that they need.

TVL: Can you walk us through your typical day?

S-GS: There are two reasons I don't have many typical days. First, I'm in consulting, where every day brings a new client and new set of challenges. Second, I work in health care, an industry that feels as though it's constantly in flux. Each day brings unexpected changes and often upends the plans I made the day or week before. So while I wouldn't say I have a "typical" day, I tend to divide my time between working directly with our clients, discussing data and results with analysts, and reading up on the latest changes in my fields of work.

TVL: What are your passions outside of work?

S-GS: The majority of my time outside work is spent rock climbing, a hobby that involves a lot of travel, another passion of mine. I really enjoy experiencing different cultures by traveling to rural climbing areas that are off the beaten path. This fall, I will spend two weeks climbing in Kalymnos, Greece.

TVL: Your parents are actuaries, right? Did that play a big part in your becoming one?

S-GS: Both of my parents being actuaries certainly played a part in my decision to enter the field. Ironically, the initial effect of having parents who were actuaries was a negative one. Growing up, I heard my parents discuss work at dinner and thought their jobs sounded boring. Despite liking math and knowing I would do something in that field, I was pretty uninterested in going the actuarial route. It wasn't until my junior year in college that I began thinking about being an actuary. One of my brothers also became an actuary, so I guess we must have enjoyed those "boring" dinner conversations after all.

TVL: What did you major in at school?

S-GS: I went to Georgia Tech, an engineering school, and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do but I knew it wasn't engineering. I ended up majoring in applied math with a dual minor in physics and economics. I wanted to keep my options open! I interned at an actuarial firm in the summer before my senior year in college and realized I wanted to pursue that path, so I attended graduate school at Georgia State and received a master's in actuarial science.

TVL: What did you look for when you first searched for a job as you were starting your career?

S-GS: I was looking for a job in a large company, with a large actuarial student program that would allow me to rotate positions through different departments and responsibilities. I wanted to experience as much variety as possible while I was still taking exams so that I would have a broad base of experience by the time I got my credentials and graduated from that rotational program. I didn't want to limit the scope of my experience when I started out, but I knew that I would eventually need to "choose an adventure" and focus on one area.

TVL: You studied a different specialty track than what you work in. How do you apply that in what you work in now?

S-GS: I chose the finance/enterprise risk management track because I was working in financial reporting at the time. If I had the chance to do it over again and knew that I would end up working in health, I think I would still choose finance over the health track. I enjoy the strategic considerations of finance, and I really enjoy considering risk at the enterprise level instead of within just one product or one line of business. As a health actuary, I spend a lot of my day-to-day time focused on the liability side of the balance sheet. However, I think it's important to keep all of the pieces in mind when you're working with other departments or trying to engage in a dialogue with executives of your organization. It's important to remember that there are other parts to the balance sheet, and successful companies consider all of the moving pieces before they make business decisions. The material that I studied for the finance/ERM exams gave me more insight into those other considerations.

TVL: What's the most important thing for students to remember in the early years of their career?

S-GS: I think the most important thing is to stay flexible and be open to any opportunities that cross your path. I meet students who are sure they want to work in one very specific area, based on very limited knowledge about the actuarial field. Keep an open mind; you may be pleasantly surprised by an area of work that you didn't previously consider. In the words of Ygritte from *Game of Thrones*, "You know nothing, Jon Snow." Someday you will be the expert, but in the meantime identify the experts, ask questions and learn as much as you can! ■



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