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Navigating New Horizons ...

an Interview with Jack Bruner

By Sarah Lawrence



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It's a well-known fact that many college graduates go on to work in fields that have little, if anything, to do with the degree they've earned. While many actuaries would never dream of switching occupations after years of schooling and grueling exams, a few, such as Jack Bruner, know from firsthand experience that a background in actuarial science can be an easy stepping stone to a successful career in any number of different fields.

Bruner currently acts as executive vice president of marketing and strategic development for CVS Caremark, a Fortune 20 company that serves more than 50 million covered members through Caremark and interacts with 5 million consumers every week through CVS pharmacies. Bruner said he was not planning on a marketing career when he was just starting out with a master's degree in actuarial science more than 30 years ago, but the progression happened naturally as his own unique talents and work preferences carved the way.

"Actuarial science is an industry where you have a very high probability of getting a job and you have a very solid set of skills that serve as a foundation," he said. "... It really does provide a

tremendous opportunity to learn what that business does and to acquire new areas of expertise. So for me that has been in marketing. It's been in product developments and innovation. And I think having a very solid technical foundation is extremely well respected. It gives you that base of knowledge to build bridges to other fields."

Early Aspirations

Bruner said his life and career path would have been completely different if it had not been for a major life-changing event that occurred when he was a senior attending high school in his hometown of Yorktown, Ind.—the death of his father from a heart attack. It was at that time that Bruner changed his focus from pursuing a degree in business from Indiana University to seeking a more specific major. "I think it probably focused me much more quickly on the need to have a career that actually produced an income," he said.

So Bruner turned to a close friend named Kent Levihn, whom he considered to be one of the best students in school, for advice. "I said, 'Kent, what are you going to do?' and he said, 'I'm going to be an actuary.' Anyway, once I found out what it was—and at that point job prospects were phenomenal for actuarial science—I actually found out that a family friend who went to the church that I grew up in, Dr. John Beekman, had headed one of the very few programs at that point in actuarial science in the United States at Ball State."

Located in nearby Muncie, Ind., attending Ball State allowed Bruner to stay close to home while earning his degree. The actuarial program was a nice fit since he had always been an astute math student. "I would have to acknowledge that when I started it was based on a limited amount of information, but it seemed like a good place to start and, frankly, I think I got lucky because it's been a tremendous profession for me," he said. By the time he graduated with his master's, he had already completed two internships and served as a teaching graduate assistant.

First Jobs

Bruner said he had no problem landing his first job out of college. He had already passed four of the actuarial exams. "Those were the days when an

actuarial student would interview with 15 companies and have 15 offers,” he recalled. He decided to accept a position as an assistant actuary with The Wyatt Company in Chicago, where his main activities involved doing pension valuations and administrative system programming.

“I had only had one computer programming course in college and it turned out to be challenging, but a great learning experience,” he said. “I learned a lot. I also learned that staying in an office every day doing technical work all day was probably not going to be the long-term track that I was interested in.”

After almost two years on the job, Bruner heard from his old friend Levihn who had accepted a consulting position with a company in Pittsburgh called Johnson & Higgins. Levihn mentioned that there were other positions available as well and Bruner jumped at the opportunity.

“The Wyatt Company was a consulting company, so technically I was consulting, but I wasn’t out of the office with clients on a frequent basis,” he said. “At Johnson & Higgins I had the chance to be actually sitting down and working with clients a couple of days a week. So that turned out to be a great experience for me.”

Bruner said Johnson & Higgins put him to work on many interesting projects regarding pensions, Social Security and cash or deferred arrangements. “We helped a hospital system actually withdraw from Social Security and set up private pension and other programs for its employees to replace it,” he said. “We implemented a 401(k) plan before 401(k) plans existed. There had only been a reference to cash or deferred plans in the Internal Revenue Code and regulations hadn’t come out yet, but we forged forward with it.”

Bruner served in this position for three years before being offered a job by Towers Perrin. It was in this position that Bruner said he got his first major exposure to marketing. After writing a paper on anticipating the funding requirements for postretirement welfare benefits, Bruner and his boss began a campaign to educate all of the major employers in Pittsburgh on the benefits of combining a change

in their pension plans to incorporate a 401(k) benefit and adding a 401(k) matching plan. They also encouraged businesses to begin scaling back their health care benefits, adding contributions and copayments to try to begin to rein in or reduce the escalation of health-care-based cost.

“I realized that one of the largest sources of employers in the Pittsburgh area was hospitals and that nobody in the company at that point was focusing on talking to anyone in the health care market,” Bruner said. “So I got permission to lead our effort to try to develop the hospital market and started developing material specifically for hospitals on these issues, but then spent the next two or three years really focused on bringing in hospitals as clients and doing projects for them.”

The idea was successful and, as a result, Bruner was subsequently put in charge of marketing for all of Towers Perrin’s services in the Pittsburgh marketplace. There he gained a national reputation for the new programs he was introducing to clients and was eventually recruited to join Chicago company Hewitt Associates as a global health care practice leader.

New Opportunities

When Bruner joined Hewitt it was very developed in the flexible benefits area, but wanted to establish and grow a health care business. Bruner was assigned this task and during his 13 years in the position managed to grow the health care practice from a revenue of \$1 million to \$100 million with total health business of \$1 billion. His final two years with the company were then spent as a global health care practice leader working on global consulting practice strategy, product development and marketing.

When Hewitt went public in 2002 and started paying out the partner’s equity in 2006, Bruner saw it as a natural time to start thinking about a transition. It was around this time that he was approached by a recruiter to join Caremark, a pharmacy benefit manager, as its chief marketing officer in charge of product development.

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“Thinking about the position of the company going forward was an exciting new chapter in a career and an exciting set of new opportunities and new challenges, but it also was dealing with a lot of the clients or customers and contacts that I’d had historically,” Bruner said. “And it really leveraged to my actuarial knowledge in addition to my marketing and health care industry knowledge. So it was kind of the perfect fit for me at that point.”

One day before Bruner was to start in his new position with Caremark, he attended a board meeting in which the board began to consider a merger with CVS. “That was both exciting and somewhat chaotic because CVS was a comparable-sized organization and it would become one of the larger mergers in the health care and benefits industry that ever occurred,” he said. “And instead of combining two businesses that kind of did the same things to get more scale and take out cost, the idea was really to create a different kind of health care company.”

Once the merger was complete, Bruner was given his current title of executive vice president of marketing and strategic development for CVS Caremark.

Current Projects

Since joining the company, much of Bruner’s marketing expertise has been focused on reducing health care costs by taking advantage of the company’s combination of providing both health insurance and pharmacy services. Much of this has been done through a process called consumer engagement, which involves using marketing techniques to make sure the consumer is educated about both the proper course of treatment for his or her condition and the cheapest method to receive that treatment.

“CVS Caremark has succeeded in significantly reducing the cost of prescription benefits to our clients by leveraging our industry-leading purchasing power, generic prescription usage, promoting over-the-counter therapies and offering mail pricing at retail,” Bruner said. “We’re also significantly reducing health care costs by improving adherence to therapies, safety interventions, screenings and acute care at Minute Clinics and the use of real time health information connectivity.”

Bruner said although marketing and actuarial work do not traditionally seem to go hand in hand, his background experience with that industry continues to become more and more important in his marketing career. “Almost all of marketing is evolving into how you use predictive analytics to understand which customers are the most profitable, how you can be the most effective in getting them to change a behavior, how many times you have to contact them to get them to change that behavior and what change in cost prompts people to take different actions,” he said. “So in lots of ways while there is a lot of creative activity in marketing, such as creating messages and brand images and all those kinds of things. It’s growing very quickly in terms of using predictive analytics to model alternate strategies and say what will be most impactful for your business.”

Words of Advice

Bruner offered several pieces of advice to those who would seek a similar career path, the first being to “look for the white space” and embrace innovation. “Stepping into situations where change is occurring creates opportunities,” he said. “You don’t have to be old to be an expert in a field if it has only existed for a year. If it’s existed for a year and you’ve worked in it for a year, you’re a world class expert.”

Bruner said the changes in both health care and retirement plans for public employees that are going to be taking place in the next couple of years will offer many opportunities for innovative actuaries who want to go places. “Build bridges, or understand that your current expertise in analytics, health care or administration may allow you to be part of a project or job that will allow you to learn new skills like marketing, product development or behavioral analytics.”

Finally, Bruner advised that the best strategy is to do what you enjoy and recognize that people are the constant. “I purposefully pursued people, subjects, clients and career opportunities that I had fun working with,” he said. “Actuarial consulting and management careers demand a lot of time and energy. It’s easy to find when you’re working with nice people and learning something new every day.” ■