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Leader Interview

With Shari Westerfield

Shari Westerfield, FSA, MAAA, is the chief actuary at the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association in Chicago with more than 25 years of health actuarial experience in both consulting and insurance environments. She also currently serves as the vice president of Health for the American Academy of Actuaries and is a member of its Board of Directors. Karen Shelton, FSA, MAAA, conducted the interview.

ON BEING AN ACTUARY

Health Watch: **How and when did you decide to become an actuary?**

Shari Westerfield: Having grown up with a penchant for math, but not wanting to be a math teacher (as my high school counselor suggested), I entered the University of Illinois in the Math and Computer Science program. I didn't even know what an actuary was until I met someone who was in the actuarial program. He recommended that I talk to the dean about the program and the profession. While it was still difficult to envision what an actuarial career would entail, I made the switch in my sophomore year. It would be years before I realized just what a perfect fit it is for me and how fortunate I was to stumble upon it.

HW: **What other careers did you consider? Or if you have had other careers, can you describe them?**

SW: In addition to computer science, I also considered accounting and finance but preferred the more math-focused actuarial path that also encompasses many aspects of computer science, accounting and finance.

HW: **What was your favorite job before you became an actuary?**

SW: In high school, I worked for my aunt at her catering business. It was inspiring to me to watch her run all aspects of the business, from developing menus with clients, cooking and set up, to managing the finances. I even learned a few cooking skills from her. She is 78 now, still cooking and still an inspiration.

HW: **What has been most crucial in your development as an actuary?**

SW: I started my actuarial career in pension and health consulting where the focus was on learning the basic actuarial concepts, developing and running models, and the importance of accurate data.

Then I went to work for a health insurance company where I not only expanded my actuarial knowledge but had the opportunity to work closely with other areas of the company, including claims, underwriting and marketing. I really gained a keen sense of how all aspects of the insurance business impact the actuarial rating and valuation work. I've tried to maintain this perspective in all the roles I've had since.

HW: **Looking at your career as an actuary—do you see any important learning milestones or turning points in your career?**

SW: In my first job out of college, I really enjoyed digging into the work and learning as much as I could each day. It took me a while to recognize and appreciate the importance of also completing the actuarial examination and credentialing process. Once I finally dedicated myself to the task and achieved it, new doors opened to future career options.

Looking back, another turning point occurred when I began volunteering with the American Academy of Actuaries. I gained a broader perspective on the vast public policy issues in which actuaries can play an important role in the discussion. The experience has provided me with a deeper understanding of the issues, the various perspectives and how our political process functions.

HW: **As an actuary—what keeps you awake at night?**

SW: Between my role at the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association and my volunteer work for the American Academy of Actuaries, I spend most of my days trying to solve some of the health care issues in the United States. With the complex issues that exist today, there is plenty to keep me awake at night.

The sustainability of the U.S. health care delivery and financing systems will likely be at the forefront of the political agenda for the foreseeable future. Actuaries can play an important role in helping policymakers understand the issues, develop potential solutions and anticipate the possible outcomes.

ON BEING A LEADER

***HW*: How much did your actuarial training prepare you for this role? What additional training—formal, informal or otherwise—did you need to be successful?**

SW: I think my actuarial training gave me a solid foundation on which to build leadership skills. I've also taken several managerial and leadership courses and read various materials, which are also helpful, but not necessarily complete. I've learned a lot by watching leaders whom I admire. An approach to leadership seems very personal. Everyone needs to find what works for them. Incorporating your own style will feel more natural and likely be perceived as authentic.

***HW*: What are the most important lessons you've learned in your role?**

SW: One very important lesson that I've learned is the need to balance all the varying perspectives that arise in developing health policy. As an actuary, I often want to believe that there is one correct or optimal solution to every problem. But as I stepped into a leadership role focused on health policy, I was exposed to more outside views, including those of policymakers, regulators and consumers. These views are often in contrast to one another, yet a common solution must meet all their needs. It's quite challenging, but it's also what makes my job interesting.

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***HW*: Let's say you're hiring your successor. If you're presented with two actuaries with equivalent experience and training, what characteristics will help you choose one over the other?**

SW: There are two main characteristics that I would look for. The first is communication skills. Actuaries are not always perceived as the best communicators, but I think that is changing. Both written and verbal communications are important to convey technical issues to nonactuaries, but also to clearly and succinctly describe to your team what your expectations are. Listening skills are just as important for clear and effective communications.

The second characteristic I would look for is emotional steadiness. Good leaders must be able to tolerate frustration and stress, and there's a lot of it in the health policy.

***HW*: Describe the biggest one or two challenges that you have faced in your role.**

SW: I think one of the biggest challenges I've faced as a chief actuary is to accept that I actually need to spend less time on actuarial projects and more time on talent management projects. I need to recognize that time spent on training, developing and coaching my staff, as well as talent assessments and succession planning, is an investment in the team's future. I really do enjoy the actuarial work, and it's difficult at times to step back and focus more on the leadership aspects of my role.

***HW*: What advice would you give to another actuary going into a leadership position for the first time?**

SW: As actuaries, we generally like to get things done ourselves. You may need to step out of your comfort zone and let people do the work themselves, but it will be worthwhile in the end. My favorite quote is that true leadership lies in guiding others to success. ■