



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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An Interview with Shiraz Jetha from Actuaries Without Borders

By Susan Robertson

The last decade has seen increasing internationalism of the actuarial bodies around the world (even as exams become more localised) and the increasing profile of the International Actuarial Association. With our own international focus here at Quantum Selection and some involvement in less developed countries, we are especially interested in the activities of Actuaries Without Borders (AWB) and Shiraz Jetha, joint vice chairman of the committee of AWB, has kindly taken time out of his holiday weekend to tell us more about what they are up to...

WHAT IS AWB?

Established in November 2003, AWB is a section within the International Actuarial Association (IAA). Its mission is described as “to make available actuarial services on a temporary basis, to assist in the development of social security, pensions, insurance, investments, or health care infrastructures. It focuses on countries in which there is an emerging actuarial profession and insufficient resources to fund such services.”

Shiraz sees this mission as a chance to ensure that projects in less advantaged places are not short changed due to lack of the resources to hire expensive and scarce actuarial skills.

After an early community-based micro-insurance initiative in Puné, India, AWB only really picked up project momentum from 2008, when Shiraz himself volunteered to go on very short notice to deliver a series of lectures on ERM in Kazakhstan. He tells us more about this rewarding experience in the December 2008 issue of *International News*.

Other projects have included very positively received lectures at the University of Kenya towards the end of last year, teaching projects in Azerbaijan and a repeat visit to Kazakhstan. A total of five projects are planned for 2010, including a session in Nairobi arising from follow up interest after the Kenya project. The repeat trip to Kazakhstan involved four actuaries, two from the United States, one from China and another from New Zealand—Shiraz finds it particularly heartening to be able to source actuaries from opposite ends of the world.

Currently, AWB has around 300 members, from 33 countries, with around half this membership coming from Australia, Canada, France, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Members do not need to be qualified actuaries. When a new project is announced, the committee seeks volunteers from within its membership. A selection process takes place to find the volunteers most appropriately matched to the project requirements and also one or two *reserves*. While all expenses are paid, the volunteer would typically not receive any payment for their services. Periods of volunteering have tended to be short, perhaps one or maybe even two weeks, but there is also time spent on preparation before the trip is taken. AWB does expect longer projects to occur from time to time.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A GOOD VOLUNTEER?

Shiraz feels that a good volunteer would give his or her very best to the project, in the same ways as when dealing with an employer or client in a normal work situation, recognising that intellectual property rights belong to the receivers of the services.

AWB provides benefits to not just the requestors of services and volunteer actuaries, but perhaps even the entire profession, in terms of raising the profile of actuaries and building the industry in less developed locations.

He goes on to say that a typical volunteer does not need to be some hardy traveller accustomed to crossing war torn regions, but he or she will have an open mind, be flexible and prepared to make an effort. Creativity is important too, for example, being able to come up with ideas to cross a language barrier (and having a little fun at the same time). Given the short time of each project, preparation is key. So, if you can manage this much, an expedition with AWB might just bring out your latent traveller instinct!

Aside from volunteering, members can contribute by making the availability of AWB services known to those concerns that could benefit by accessing these services. They can also help with support work and documentation, improving processes within AWB and increasing the reach in terms of sourcing volunteers on short notice.

WHY VOLUNTEER TO HELP AWB?

Personal growth is top of the list for Shiraz and the other volunteering actuaries who have provided feedback. Shiraz also points out that AWB provides benefits to not just the requestors of services and volunteer actuaries, but perhaps even the entire profession, in terms of raising the profile of actuaries and building the industry in less developed locations as volunteers practice and showcase the profession. The providers of funds also benefit and an effort is made to provide a win-win-win solution for all key stakeholders.

From a career perspective (after all that's what we do!), volunteering can broaden your network, not only within AWB, but with actuarial and other professionals in different countries. It provides insight into potential future markets

and allows you to view some things from an entirely different perspective, particularly in view of today's globalisation.

Your current employer may also view your volunteering in a positive way, irrespective of whether your organization is global in operation or not. Shiraz observes that when you take an assignment outside your comfort zone, you are making a strong statement about yourself.

WHERE TO FROM HERE FOR ACTUARIES WITHOUT BORDERS?

The AWB committee would like to see the membership grow and also plan to improve the efficiency of internal processes. They are enthusiastic about sourcing new projects and welcome requests, for example, from insurance regulators, government ministries, local actuarial bodies, universities or even private industry in developing economies—really anywhere that lacks local actuarial expertise.



Shiraz Jetha

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OK, we admit, Actuaries Without Borders may not be quite as glamorous as *Médecins Sans Frontières*, but Shiraz points out it provides the actuarial profession with a means to contribute to facilitating growth and development in third world and other developing economies, in a sense improving the quality of life in those environments and perhaps saving lives in the process. All in all, he finds it a wonderful collaboration, encompassing geographical and technical diversity.

You can find more about Actuaries Without Borders at the Actuaries Without Borders section of the International Actuarial Association website and also in an article by Shiraz in the March 2009 edition of *Contingencies*. For more detail on Shiraz's volunteer trip to Kazakhstan, see page 16 of the December 2008 issue of *International News*.

If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact Shiraz (s.jethaa@gmail.com) or any other relevant committee members at the e-mail addresses provided on AWB website.

Shiraz Jetha, FSA, CERA, MAAA, is an actuary at the Office of Insurance Commissioner in Olympia, Wash. and co-vice chair of Actuaries Without Borders. In addition to his work for OIC Shiraz also assists organizations in multi-disciplinary projects involving actuarial work on a voluntary basis—recent examples of which involve a locally based health care program design, funding and monitoring project and a feasibility study for AKDN on Microinsurance in Kabul, Afghanistan. □