



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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CONFESSIONS OF A FACEBOOK JUNKIE: Actuarial Science Clashes With Pop Culture

BY RONALD POON-AFFAT

HI, MY NAME IS RONALD POON-AFFAT and I am a Facebook junkie; I check my page multiple times a day, including when I am at work. This got me thinking. Have I developed Facebook dependency issues or am I just “ahead of my time?” As a trained actuary, I decided to get to the bottom of this conundrum by initiating a survey.

My first sample was my friends. I quickly discovered that my friends lie on opposite sides of the fence. There are those who think Facebook is pretty cool and those who think it’s for morons. But hey! Even Dr. Sheldon Cooper’s character (“Big Bang Theory”) is on Facebook, so there must be some attraction—even for the intelligentsia.

A profession can be defined as a body of people in a learned occupation. So what happens if this body becomes divided into those who Facebook and those who don’t? As Lincoln famously discoursed, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Even with their present impressive number of users, social networking sites are only now getting started. Facebook was started in February 2004 and now has more than 400

million active users. Fifty percent of active users log on to Facebook on any given day. More than 35 million users update their status each day. More than 60 million status updates are posted each day and, most importantly, more than 5 billion pieces of content (Web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared each week. And by the time that you read this editorial, all of these numbers will be a lot bigger.

Just by looking at these numbers, I would argue that to ignore the Facebook phenomenon would be akin to ignoring e-mail/blackberry/Internet/cell phones. Anyone ignoring these standard business tools would be immediately classified as a Luddite. But enough of name calling. Could being on Facebook (or not) really have a negative impact on the professional development of actuaries as they progress through their career?

My second survey was a subset of Facebook actuarial friends who qualified around the same time that I did (1991). They were unanimous in denouncing Facebook as being entirely frivolous, and bear in mind these actuaries were all on Facebook.

Not deterred by this lack of enthusiasm from my initial sample (and driven by the fact that I was committed to writing an editorial), for my third and final survey, I reached out to an entirely different cohort; the Hawkeyes from the University of Iowa’s Actuarial Science Club. I created a simple sample survey and distributed it to the faculty. The results are as follows.

In all there were 36 respondents:

- Ninety-seven percent are on Facebook.
- Seventy-two percent check it at least once a day (44 percent make multiple visits).
- When I asked how many actively used Facebook in a professional capacity, 92 percent said they did. This can be divided between light users—81 percent (less than 25 percent of the time spent on work) and medium users—11 percent (between 25 percent and 50 percent of the time spent on work).
- When asked what they thought about the “future professional usage” after leaving college, the 11 percent figure (mentioned in the point above) jumped significantly to 47 percent.
- Forty-two percent thought Facebook would definitely be positive for the image of the profession; with 47 percent saying “maybe.”

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- The top five areas in which Facebook could have an impact on their professional careers were (in order): career development, image of the profession, reaching out to a global actuarial network, keeping up to date with regulation, and continuing professional development.

It would appear that the not surprising conclusion from these nonscientific surveys is that there is definitely a generation gap regarding the potential of Facebook playing an integral part of the future development of the profession.

Right now only 10 percent of U.S. companies allow access to Facebook. Social networking sites have been unjustly characterized as “networking” sites as opposed to professional networking. It’s only when companies see the value of keeping their employees plugged into Facebook that we

will really start to see the emergence of professional benefits.

I would like to compare sharing of information via Facebook to a Saturday night dinner party which includes actuaries and their nonactuarial spouses. Information on family/business/politics/sports/leisure is seamlessly interspersed throughout the evening. A group of actuarial Facebook friends may start off with frivolous banter, but I reckon that it will not take long for actuarial issues to start popping up.

There can be little doubt that Facebook is a catalyst that’s accelerating the frenetic pace of the information highway. I strongly believe that it will serve to revolutionize the way we update and broaden our knowledge; the way we collaborate with in the actuarial profession and with others; and the way we bring our knowledge and experience to the application level in

the marketplace. We all need to embrace this new communication tool.



Scott McNeely may have said it best and most simply, “When people are networked, their power multiplies geometrically.” **A**

Ronald Poon-Affat, FSA, FIA, MAAA, CFA, is a Board Member of the SOA and an Executive Director of Tempo Assist, a Sao Paulo-based health conglomerate.

He can be contacted on Facebook under Riskmaster Ron; e-mail address: rpoonaffat@yahoo.com.

Visit <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SSGSWWP> if you wish to participate in the Facebook survey mentioned within this article. Results will be published within the next edition.

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CALLING ALL ELIGIBLE VOTERS

This year, elections open **August 9** and will close **September 3**. Complete election information can be found at www.soa.org/elections. Any election questions can be sent to elections@soa.org.