



Article from
The Stepping Stone
March 2020



Piecing Together the Puzzle of Hobby and Career

By Amanda Hug

Teacher. Doctor. Firefighter. Professional basketball player. Answers come easy and often when five-year-olds rocking tutus or the latest superman or superwoman costume are asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The answer rarely comes easy when asked in a joking manner of mid-career colleagues at a professional juncture.

For five-year-old Amanda, the answer varied, but I did think it would be particularly fun to be a dolphin trainer. I loved being in the water and was also amazed at the intimate connection between trainer and animals. I think sometime around college I took to the internet to see if maybe, just maybe, there was a short summer training program to work with dolphins so I could “get it out of my system” before I joined corporate America. Alas, there was not.

So, I graduated from college with my math degree and embarked upon my actuarial journey at MassMutual. Three years later when I earned my FSA, I had a definitive answer as to what I would be when I grew up: an actuary. Question answered. Case closed. Right? Well, of course, you all know it isn’t that simple. My actuarial credentials were just the beginning, a foundation upon which I could build my career in many different directions.

The same is true for the other 30,000-plus members of the Society of Actuaries (SOA). There is no one-size-fits-all end game for actuaries. It is up to each of us to pursue a path that both aligns to our strengths and awakens our passions. But just how do we figure out what that path is? When a role is wrapping up and we’re looking for the next, how do we decide which position is a good fit?



There are of course many ways to do this: brainstorm with your mentor, meet with people in different roles, read posted job descriptions, take career assessments—the list goes on. Those are all helpful suggestions and good things to do. But first, it might be wise to take a step back and consider this: What are my hobbies and interests outside of work?

Time is a precious commodity, and where we spend our limited personal time outside of the office often reveals where our passions truly lie. Although it may seem on the surface that hobbies such as racquetball or scrapbooking have little to do with an actuarial career, I’d argue there are some important connections to be found.

When I was younger, I certainly was not thinking about how my hobbies connected to my career trajectory. It’s only in retrospect that I can see where they did. Let me share how this principle rang true for me at different inflection points in my career.

MANAGING A (MAKE-BELIEVE) HORSE FARM

I had an early fascination with horses and started riding at age eight. This obsession meant lots of horse-related gifts under the Christmas tree, where I eventually accumulated a set of about 25 Breyer model horses and four wooden barns in which they resided. I appointed myself manager of my horse farm, naming each of the horses, hiring make-believe riding instructors and soliciting make-believe clients for lessons. I spent hours playing with these horses and orchestrating the events of the farm. My favorite part of it all was recording the farm schedule and associated revenues and expenses in a prized notebook. I would track fees for group lessons, private lessons, wages for my instructors and other dollar amounts needed to run the farm. I got joy out of the math necessary to keep track of my complex operation.

I may no longer be tracking horse-related numbers, but I can now easily see how my early love for numbers and math led me to an actuarial career. I'm sure each of you has your own stories that illustrate an early love for math and the ordering of numbers.

THE YEAR OF THE DREADLOCKS

My junior year of college, I took a semester off school and backpacked around Europe, which was a great experience on so many levels. The night before I left, I invited five of my best friends to come over and help me turn my long and curly brown hair into a head of dreadlocks. (In case anyone is thinking of trying this, know that it took about seven hours of those five friends raking my hair against my scalp with metal combs. It's no small endeavor, and an irreversible one at that.)

My mother was horrified, to say the least. I think she actually cried because she thought I would get detained by TSA at the airport. But I loved the look and the next day boarded my transatlantic flight for my semester traveling abroad. I kept my dreadlocks for a few months after I returned to school, wanting

to squeeze every moment out of the style before I had to get practical again.

Everyone who knew me was pretty surprised by the hair choice. I was a straitlaced kid growing up, and I didn't exactly fit the dreadlock mold. But I think that's exactly what prompted me to try it. I have this inner desire to surprise people, to do the unexpected and to show others that it's okay to not always fit the mold. I think that same spirit is exactly what has fueled my career choices, especially as of late.

For a mathematically minded person like me to become an actuary, that is what is expected. It was a predictable and sensible choice, and one that I am glad I made. But I never wanted that to be the end of my story. I viewed the actuarial profession as a great platform from which to build a career in business leadership. For that reason, I recently pursued and completed an MBA at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. Around the same time, I was offered the opportunity to take a role as the chief of staff to the chief financial officer at MassMutual. It was the perfect chance to expand from my traditional actuarial roles to a more holistic business role and to start to apply my MBA education.

Like my dreadlocks, these career moves were also unexpected. I had many actuaries question why I needed an MBA if I already had an FSA, which many consider to be the equivalent of a master's degree. Subsequently, when I took my role as chief of staff, I had a number of actuaries wondering if I was no longer interested in the actuarial profession. My first week in the role, I had an actuarial colleague of mine ask, "Did you ever get your FSA?" When I exclaimed, "Yes! Five years ago!" he replied, "But this isn't an actuarial position."

That was, of course, technically true. However, I believe that the opportunity to work directly for the CFO allows me to use my



analytical actuarial background while gaining insights into the management and oversight of the company at large. As a bonus, it helps break down the actuarial mold and hopefully expand the thinking of others as to what can be expected from actuaries.

RAPPELLING DOWN A 19-STORY BUILDING

Now that I've taken this less-than-traditional role, people love to ask what's next for me. It's the grown-up version of "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The honest answer: I'm not completely sure. I have a few ideas of what roles might be interesting, but I'm still in the exploration stage. So I've taken my own advice and considered what it is that I love to do outside of work, and how that might inform my next step.

Adventure travel ranks high on my list of hobbies, having traveled to every continent but Antarctica (which is on my short list!). I've had the opportunity to do some really fun things in my travel over the years, ones that probably ding me a few notches on my life insurance underwriting questionnaire. One of the scarier experiences was when I elected to rappel, face-first, down a 19-story building. It was just a little bit more daunting due to the light rain from a thunderstorm that was passing through at the time. (I think safety standards are a little more lax in other countries!) I was completely terrified, but I did it anyway because I like to force myself to do things that scare me. It always ends up being a total rush and, more important, builds my confidence as to what I really am capable of.

So how does this apply to my next role? It reminds me that I should look for something a little out there that is going to stretch me, challenge me, and yes, maybe even scare me a bit. It is in these types of roles that I know I will be most satisfied and grow the most.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

That's a lot about me. Now it's your turn to take a crack at this. It's a simple (and fun!) exercise to chart out each of your hobbies, what you like about them and how that could apply to your career path. It's a great activity at any career juncture to help bring clarity to what you should do next. For you, it most likely won't be managing a horse farm, getting dreadlocks or rappelling down a building, but I have no doubt it will be something as wonderfully eclectic and informative. There is no perfect mold to follow when it comes to actuaries and our career journeys, and there is definitely no wrong answer to this puzzle of hobbies and career. It's just another tactic to help you answer the ever-persistent question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Once you've had the chance to reflect on this for yourself, please drop me a line and let me know what you've learned. I'd love to hear how your personal interests and career journeys intersect! ■



Amanda Hug, FSA, MAAA, is chief of staff to the chief financial officer at MassMutual. She can be reached at ahug@massmutual.com.