



Article from

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# PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

## Reflections at Crunch Time

By Tony Batory

*Editor's note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is one of the winners from the Early Entrant category.*

*A version of this story was published in the May/June 1996 issue of Contingencies. Another version appears in Actuarial Jokes, Memoirs and Other Minutiae, by Tony Batory, published 2015 by Outskirts Press. Reprinted with permission.*

**T**here are many types of actuaries: casualty/life, consulting/insurance, Big A/little a. I have a categorization based on writing tool. I'm a WP actuary. I use a wood pencil.

Most actuaries use pen. In the midst of advances in technology, some actuaries consciously or unconsciously pursue an aura of infallibility drawn in ink. The question is whether this goal has become passé in today's business environment.

Some actuaries use mechanical pencils. That's a cop-out. Some of these MPs don't even have erasers, which defeats the whole

purpose of a pencil. The apparent advantage of not having to sharpen the thing is illusory, since the uniformly thin lead frequently breaks, leaving minute chunks of graphite scattered across the horizon of your workstation.

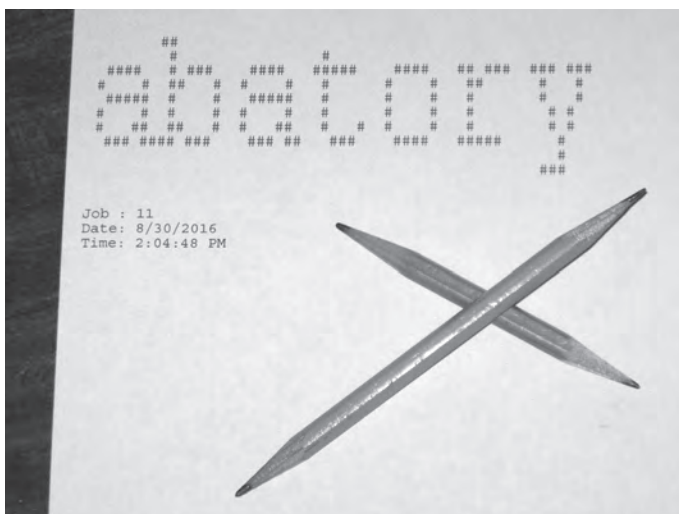
The business environment had an impact. With various mergers and acquisitions, I worked for four different companies in four years. With the owner du jour expressing a special interest in the current project, our weekly status meeting grew tense when a subtle miscommunication made missing our deadline a possibility. Contributing to the anxiety was a 20-ounce cafeteria coffee that had been known to dissolve plastic spoons and an adrenalin buildup from having to sit quietly while our contract lawyer tediously outlined the problem.

With no other outlet, I found myself chewing through my pencil. First the eraser, then the metal band and finally the wood itself. A symbolic taste of ashes became a real taste of graphite as I fretted about our blown project. But the tension release was valuable. The graphite dust that settled in my beard added a steely distinguished look, reminiscent of the gray hairs that this project was adding to the heads of my colleagues. That inspired discussion about an actuarial hair-coloring product with a new tint for the aspiring analyst: lead. The marketing slogan would be "Only your actuary knows for sure."

When I returned to my desk and stared at the jagged end of my pencil, the consequences of "crunch time" became physically apparent. Something possessed me to shove that jagged end into my electric sharpener. Out came a double-edged sword, a fitting symbol of the project that we were working on and of actuarial prowess in general: how to turn adversity into flexibility. My new device was also a reminder of the people who were pulling overtime on this project; while they were burning the candle at both ends, I was sharpening my pencil at both ends.

Our project turned out OK; we made our deadline. And although there was a lot of hard work from a lot of people, I don't discount the role of my two-sided WP. I became a WP purist, although not always two-sided.

The permanence of ink is unsuitable in a flexible business environment. And though technology will doubtless continue to advance, there will always be a place for the WP—in my heart, in my hand and between my teeth. ■



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