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Many Hands Make Light Work: Interviews With Former SmallCo Section Chairs, Part I

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Editor's note: This article is the first of a two-part series. Look for Part II in the December issue of Small Talk.

In November 2019, back when we were able to gather in large groups, I attended my first Society of Actuaries (SOA) Leadership Orientation Meeting in Schaumburg, Ill., along with many section council chairs and vice chairs and other SOA volunteers. During the evening cocktails and networking event at the SOA offices, I had the opportunity to meet or reengage with several former Smaller Insurance Company Section chairs. Jerry Enoch and Don Walker regaled current chair Carolyn Covington and me with stories about the good old days. That night I learned that Jerry was instrumental in our group being called SmallCo instead of SIC (thank you, Jerry). I was also reminded of how generous SmallCo members are with their time and advice.

Because of those conversations, I had the idea to interview some of the past SmallCo section chairpersons to tell their stories and thank them for the contributions they have made to SmallCo, the SOA and our industry. Thank you to Mark Rowley, Jerry Enoch, Don Walker and Sharon Giffen for allowing me to share their stories. I only had time and space to interview four, so to the rest of the past section chairs, please know that your time and efforts are appreciated as well and if you want to reminisce, I'm happy to listen!

WHY DID YOU FIRST JOIN SMALLCO?

Mark told me his industry involvement has always been targeted at roles that will help him do his job better. Mark said, "About 20 years ago, when I was a consultant for a couple years with a small consulting firm, the head of that company was involved with SmallCo and he introduced me to it. My main involvement then was writing a few articles for the newsletter. Then over time when I joined a small company, that's when I really started to see a lot of the benefits of it." As a small company actuary, you can feel like you are out on an island if you are the only credentialed actuary in your organization, he said. It has been extremely valuable for Mark to create a network of actuaries within SmallCo. The way to do that is to get involved, get on a team, volunteer. To this day, Mark knows who to call for advice or opinions, which helps him do his job better. Over time this support became reciprocal, and others call him to brainstorm too.

Before he joined SmallCo, Jerry was on other sections in various capacities and was very aware of the importance of them. He understood the value of what SOA sections do for those involved. Jerry said, "I gave it some thought because I wanted to get involved in another section. Because I was a small company actuary, and pretty much have been for most of my career, I just chose SmallCo."



Don spent 41 years at a small company, Farm Bureau of Michigan, the life subsidiary of a property and casualty company. He started in IT, where he stayed for 20 years, then moved to actuarial at age 40. He was made head of the actuarial department. Don said, “I was tired of IT and wanted to go to actuarial, but being told to manage the department was a bit of a shock!” Don’s predecessor left abruptly and had not signed the annual statement yet. Prior to his actuarial role, Don was the programmer who always worked with the actuaries. He had started taking exams, but he didn’t have his credentials yet. One of the other actuaries at Farm Bureau introduced Don to SmallCo because he thought it would help Don with his new role in actuarial. Don ended up being the chief actuary for 21 years.

When Sharon joined SmallCo, she didn’t work for a really small company. “Forester’s is not tiny by any means,” she said, “but I was doing U.S. statutory valuation with truly minimum staff. I had one person who was quite an expert and me. I was learning, and I was signing. I found that the group at SmallCo, they understood that whole idea of how to make do with really, really small staff. It was just a camaraderie that I really enjoyed to get some ideas on how to deal with doing all the work that the big companies need to do with fewer resources. For me it was about smaller resources than smaller company, but it worked.”

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO RUN FOR THE SMALLCO SECTION COUNCIL AND/OR HOLD A LEADERSHIP POSITION?

Previously, Jerry had been involved in leadership on the Financial Reporting Section Council. He thought another leadership role could help him. Jerry believes, “Good leadership is important. As a leader you have to push yourself to be involved. It’s harder to slack off if you are the leader. Another thing is, I have a desire to make a difference, to improve the world around me. And a leadership role provides leverage for influence.”

Part of Mark’s motivation was to improve his relationship with his network. “The more visible you are,” he says, “the more people get to know you and rely on you and you get to know people better.” Mark has been chairperson a couple of times, and he says it was good practice in leadership. He tried to focus on managing the section and a group of volunteers rather than doing a lot of the work himself. Recruiting people and getting to know people better were key. He also wanted to give back to the profession and serve small company actuaries. Mark said, “I really have empathy for small insurance company actuaries because it’s a tough job. If we could actually provide content, that would help them [do their job].” He enjoys being involved in the collaborative efforts of SmallCo to put forth good content on webinars and at meetings, and he learned from the other volunteers. Mark believes this section helps small company actuaries do their jobs better with the content we provide.

Sharon recalled, “I think somebody told me I should [run for council].” She was also involved with the actuarial section of

the National Fraternal Congress of America (NFCA). Sharon worked for Foresters, which is a fraternal benefits society, and was part of the association. She joined the actuary section to learn about fraternalism and how the actuaries do their work. Sharon said, “I think it was at least partly through NFCA’s actuary section that I became much more interested in getting involved. I was kind of involved with the leadership of the NFCA actuary section and SmallCo’s council about the same time.” She helped organize meetings and gained experience being in charge and thinking of interesting topics. “Everything was interesting too,” she says, “so it was easy to help derive different topics and agendas. Although I started really wrapped around the idea of statutory valuation, I certainly found that I got lots of good ideas on a whole range of topics. I would say risk management was one of the most important branches I got off on to understand what other companies did about risk management with again, almost no resources.”

During the first two years Don was chief actuary, he didn’t have his ASA yet, and still only has an ASA. Don served on the Taxation Section Council before becoming a SmallCo Section Council member. Don shared, “Serving was something I enjoyed, and it gave me many good contacts. It was a privilege to serve.”

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE SERVING AS SMALLCO SECTION CHAIR?

Don shared, “2008 and the surrounding years were definitely a challenge.” He was the appointed actuary for his company at the time. When the industry first started talking about principle-based reserving (PBR), Don went to the SOA’s Valuation Actuarial Symposium in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Donna Claire was talking about new professionalism rules and PBR. Don approached Donna afterward and asked if it was her intention to make him ineligible to sign statements that he had been signing for 10 years. Donna said no, and some of the rules changed. The SOA had never thought of ASAs as being in leadership positions. Don said that era was an exciting time to be in SmallCo and to be on the council. They were being told all sorts of things about big companies, and the group kept asking “What about small companies?” Don shared, “We had a voice. Mark, Jerry, Sharon—we had a good group.”

Jerry said, “I think that to some extent in the past, the section council had been sort of a ‘woe is me, we have a tough lot,

“Small companies definitely have the idea that we are better together and I think that makes a huge difference in the council itself.” —Sharon Giffen

we're small company actuaries, no one understands us, and we don't have any resources.' I thought there was sort of a negative mindset, a victim mindset, and a thought that we really couldn't do much." His biggest obstacle was overcoming this negative mindset. To try to change that mindset, Jerry exhibited an expectation that the SmallCo Section was going to make things happen. They were here to make a difference. Luckily, others on the council were ready to accept that challenge and were willing to catch his vision. They were eager to try things, take risks and get something done.

Jerry gave an example of one of his first face-to-face council meetings. The group was talking about possibilities to do things differently. Someone suggested having a seminar just for small company actuaries. Since it was thought there wouldn't be enough attendance, a series of webinars over a couple of days was suggested. Webinars were not that prevalent at this time, but from this discussion, they decided to set a goal of having one webinar per quarter. As background, before this, SmallCo had only had one webinar, which Don Walker had arranged, with the Financial Reporting Section on the topic of year-end reporting. The group was willing to take a step forward and try something new. This step put SmallCo somewhat in the lead as far as doing webinars. A side benefit of this change was increasing the income generated. With just membership dues as income, it was hard to provide much research or other resources, but with the additional funds from webinars, SmallCo was able to do more for its members.

Sharon said that when she led the section, the group was doing okay financially, but the challenge was finding good, relevant and important topics on which to spend the section resources. In her era, SmallCo didn't do a lot of research. The section council started to push that more and do things in partnership with other sections so they could learn. At that time, they were also in the early stages of putting on webcasts. "It was sort of figuring out how to get money and then spend it effectively," according to Sharon, "[that] was really the challenge, because that was something I wasn't familiar with."

Mark said his challenge as chairperson was to back off from the things he likes to do and focus on recruiting and leadership. Mark gave a little background and said he was very blessed to have had Jerry Enoch as a mentor. Jerry was the chairperson when Mark was vice chair, and Mark learned a lot from Jerry, whose motto was "Many hands make light work." He feels SmallCo does this better than anyone because we aren't trying to overburden any one person. Mark said Jerry's goal was to get lots of different people involved, and that is difficult. The chairperson has to work hard to make this happen, and it takes time. We have lots of friends of the council who contribute a lot. Mark stressed that the key to leadership is to continue to recruit new members and new leadership. You can't just do it on the monthly call, because it is too easy for people to say no in that environment. He said the best way to recruit people to

help is "just to ask, and ask them one on one. To get them on a call today, you have to get them on Zoom I guess. It is harder for them to say no if you ask them one on one." The author can attest this works, as a personal phone call from Mark is what prompted me to run for council.

SECTION COUNCIL VOTING HAS JUST CONCLUDED. WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW SECTION COUNCIL MEMBERS?

Mark not only encourages the new council members to be involved, but he expects them to be involved. He doesn't want any one person to get overburdened or burned out, and he encourages members to play a consistent role. "It doesn't really matter what it is," he says. "I'd try to find something that will help you in your job. There are a number of things you can get involved in." Mark's advice is, "Stay involved, feel good about giving back to the profession, and think about all the small company actuaries you are helping." He adds, "Be a leader and help out where you can without getting overburdened."

Don agrees with Mark. "Sections need leadership," he says, "and the section chair should not be doing everything. They should be getting other people to take leadership responsibilities and not try to do everything themselves." Don advised we need to have a strong council and told me to set a good example. "Don't do everything yourself!" Don cautioned. "With SmallCo, the problem is a lack of time, but you have to make time." Don's advice to new members is to encourage others to be on committees.

Sharon's advice is, "Get involved. Just really be open to do things that you've never done before. The real benefit of this group is that it is small, it's friendly. Small companies, I think, tend to be more friendly, not only inside the company, but with each other because small companies definitely have the idea that we are better together and I think that makes a huge difference in the council itself." She went on to recommend new members should have the view that we are better together. She said to invite your friends from small companies to come along as a friend. Sharon continued her advice saying SmallCo is a way to spread your network without traditional networking activities that actuaries don't like.

Jerry advised that, first, whoever is bringing the new council members on board needs to cast a vision for the new people and explain expectations. His advice to the new members is "to look for opportunities to get involved, look for opportunities to make a difference. You're not going to want to get involved in every possible activity, but choose a few things that are important to you and that you can enter into with enthusiasm. Whatever you do, do it well. If you find yourself struggling, look to the council chair or somebody to get a little help rather than languishing. And of course, one of the things I think is important is to try to have some fun."

In the next issue, I will share what accomplishments made these past chairs proud and their advice for future section chairs. You will also hear why they believe there will always be a need for a group like SmallCo and some final thoughts about their time with the Smaller Insurance Company Section. ■



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