After much anticipation and preparation, mandatory implementation of life principle-based reserving (PBR) has finally arrived in the United States, meaning life insurers’ valuation practices must comply with the requirements of Section 20 of the NAIC Valuation Manual (VM-20) for new individual life policies issued in 2020 and later.

Oliver Wyman recently completed its 2020 Life PBR Emerging Practices survey, with results providing a broad industry perspective on implementation impacts, strategy, assumptions and challenges. More than 50 companies, representing 95 percent of the individual life market by written premium, participated in the survey.

While participants are in different stages of PBR model maturity, none of those surveyed are completely satisfied with their initial implementation, with most listing refinements to models as a future area of focus. This article provides further insights into the trends and drivers observed around planned future refinements to PBR models.

AREAS OF FOCUS
Figure 1 shows the areas where survey participants are planning future model refinements.

| Analytics and analysis tools | 82% |
| Runtime reduction techniques | 33% |
| Valuation process | 63% |
| Policy level adjustments | 20% |

Analytics and analysis tools were the most commonly cited refinement, as insurers are keen on building out data visualization dashboards and enhanced analytics to enable better understanding and explanation of results. Refinements to the valuation process were also common, with participants focusing on runtime reduction, automation and controls.

RUNTIMES ARE DRIVING MODEL SIMPLIFICATIONS
Model runtimes are a growing concern for most life insurers. The time to complete a total production valuation process (i.e., quarter-end run) ranged from a few hours to an entire day. As shown in Figure 2, lengthy runtimes have led to modeling simplifications in order to meet reporting schedules, and many are considering expanding grid or cloud computing capabilities.
The most common modeling technique to combat lengthy runtime is a reduction in the number of scenarios used in the stochastic reserve (SR). No insurers in the survey are currently running a full set of 10,000 scenarios in their valuation process, and the majority use a scenario-picking tool to reduce their scenario set to 1,000. Additional computing power from grid expansion or cloud-based computing may be desirable not only for point-in-time valuations but also for nested modeling required to project VM-20 reserves.

SOFTWARE CONSIDERATIONS CONTINUE TO BE TOP OF MIND

The two most common software packages used for Life PBR valuations and projections by participants were MG-ALFA (now Milliman Integrate) and Moody’s Analytics AXIS; both received high ratings for ease of use. Although not as widely used, FIS Prophet saw ratings increase significantly compared to last year, with above-average rankings for ease of use, transparency and auditability.

As the focus shifts from initial implementation to business as usual, the appetite for software conversions has remained steady as compared to 2019, with about 50 percent of participants having considered a change to their actuarial systems as a result of PBR.1 The desire to convert may be driven by modernization efforts in conjunction with other regulatory changes, putting additional pressure on existing software (e.g., GAAP Long Duration Targeted Improvements or International Financial Reporting Standard 17) or by those not completely satisfied with the level of flexibility or robustness allowed for in their initial implementation.

LOOKING FORWARD

As the volume of business being reported under PBR grows in the coming years, the need to balance model runtime, accuracy and analytics will only become more essential. Those that develop a scalable and controlled process rooted in back-end analytics at the onset will have the advantage of forward-looking insights that drive strategic decisions, while reducing the strain on systems and staff.

ENDNOTES

1 Statistic includes those who did or are in the process of making a change to their actuarial systems as a result of PBR.
Five Surprising Benefits of Actuarial Model Conversion

By Stephan Mathys

In the past decade, many of the “standard” actuarial practices have been significantly revised. From new access to data sets to the introduction of principle-based reserves in the United States and International Financial Reporting Standard 17 (IFRS-17) across the world, to the introduction of cloud technologies that enable unprecedented scope and speed of calculation, actuaries are now expected to do more than virtually any generation before.

New technologies have enabled these transitions, and with them have come new use cases for those technologies. Robotic process automation, anyone? What about self-service cloud data storage? Or even just the fact that there are finally some real, viable alternatives to Excel.

One area many actuaries are now working in is the “actuarial modernization” effort, which encompasses the transformation from number crunching according to a set of rules to value-added analysis and actuarial judgment in the process.

Along with the changes to support new reporting data requirements, many actuarial employers have initiated actuarial system enhancements to perform the calculations using modern technologies. Those system enhancements are generally of two types. The first is to upgrade a legacy system to the newest version (like upgrading an old version of Windows, maybe Windows 7, to a newer version, such as Windows 10). The second is to purchase a new system and re-create models from the old system in the new one, and then compare results between them. For simplicity, I'll call both of these a “conversion” from here on out.

This article is not about the system selection decision, per se. Systems are chosen based on multiple criteria, and often those criteria are very technical in nature. For instance, simply understanding and tracking all of the cohorts from one period to another, and enabling analysis of change of the reserve balances, might be enough to convince the decision makers to convert from an antiquated setup to a modern actuarial system.

Instead, this article will support actuaries earlier in the process: during their push for converting to another system, to take advantage of advancements in the field since their last system decision.

Technical advantages from conversion are numerous. They include auditing current models and processes; creating a comprehensive view of all those processes; streamlining procedures; reviewing model governance structures and filling in the gaps; reviewing and revising materiality limits; retiring or merging unnecessary models; and discovering latent model risks.

Those who may be interested in changing systems, yet are finding resistance from decision makers, could find support in this article. They could consider using these arguments to make the case that an investment in the transition process would be worthwhile.
Those who have recently completed a system conversion may wish to refer to these ideas as well. They may be able to show broader return on their investment in a new system, in addition to the number of hours of processing time saved or bytes of data stored.

These nontechnical benefits fall into two general categories: what I'm calling cross-pollination opportunities and attitude advancements. All of these are separate from explicit technical modeling practice benefits previously mentioned.

**CROSS-POLLINATION OPPORTUNITIES**

**Cross-Train Team Members on Products or Functionality**

Model conversion offers a great opportunity for professionals who have only ever worked with a limited set of the company’s products or processes to get an insight into other aspects of the company.

You can assign the universal life model conversion to the annuity team or vice versa. You could assign a pricing model to a valuation expert. This will bring new eyes to the process and often sparks questions of “Hey, why are you doing it that way? That’s not aligned with what we do in our area.”

This cross-pollination will broaden the skill set of the actuaries involved. Further, it can strengthen the backup systems you may need to call on if an actuary is promoted, takes a different position or even leaves the company.

Such diversity of thought and attitude strengthens the justifications for having your processes set up a certain way and can even bring new attitudes and perspectives to the problems involved. As a result, actuaries can become more robust professionals. Plus, the actuarial functions can evolve to be more resilient for having been tested, refined and improved throughout.

**Systematize and Synchronize Processes Across Lines of Business or Functional Units**

Most, if not all, of your divisions will have divergent models and model build processes. That is to be expected as you have different modeling needs, different data sources and different expertise.

However, similar to cross-training professionals, undertaking a model conversion project is an opportunity to review what’s working across various divisions of your company and apply those best practices to other locales.

For example, if the annuity group has streamlined its assumption review and improvement process, maybe that will help the asset group with its cumbersome and outdated workflow.

Just as you might do with any individual element in a set of models within a single vertical division, comparisons across divisions can provide opportunities to pull out best practices that were previously isolated from the company as a whole and apply them across the board.

This advances capabilities and can enhance the work done, amplifying the effects of the model conversion process itself.

**ATTITUDE ADVANCEMENTS**

**Develop a Culture of Innovation and Critical Thinking**

Everyone is looking for competitive advantages. And as barriers to entry fall everywhere, all types of entities—from insurance companies to consultants to regulators—are looking to take advantage of these new opportunities. Those can be in the form of new technologies or new approaches to existing problems.

However, these new approaches can’t be adopted when minds are set against change, innovation and advancement.

There’s an old actuarial joke that illustrates the all-too-often state of affairs:

**Q:** How many actuaries does it take to change a light bulb?

**A:** How many did it take last year?

Very funny.

Unfortunately, this is illustrative of a traditional mindset: What was done before is good enough, so let’s just go with that.

However, it also highlights an important skill that is sometimes missing in actuarial work: a willingness to try something new without knowing exactly what the steps are. And yet this is the component that is often most critical to innovation and discovery.

Most employers say they want that innovative, problem-solving mindset. Incorporating a new modeling system represents a step in that direction. It can be like “putting your money where your mouth is” when encouraging this perspective that looks for new ways to approach new challenges. After all, that’s why actuaries are involved in the first place: to be innovative problem solvers, not just order takers.

**Reduce Conversion Risk by Implementing New Systems in a Phased Transition**

Remember, implementing a new modeling system need not be an all-or-nothing approach. Yes, it can be good for a company to have all models and modeling processes standardized, documented and implemented across all functions and lines of business. But that ignores the reality that many companies have blocks of business that just are not consistent in terms of model needs, data integrity or back-end support.

For example, individual life insurance and annuity policies will have differing modeling bases, different priority model outputs and different materiality thresholds from group life and group disability policies.
It’s likely that these different business units already have different model systems in place. Some may be using a comprehensive actuarial system, while others have Excel spreadsheets or data warehouse applications that do everything for them. To assume that the individual life and group life actuaries must all convert their existing models to a new platform at the same time does not reflect the actual business needs of those departments.

Because of this, companies may find value in a limited conversion or trial of a single block or small product line before committing to converting the rest. This would limit their potential risk of overcommitting to the new system. It would allow them a chance to practice and refine their model conversion process as well. They could see what works and what doesn’t with that line of business and adapt the remaining conversion process (including timelines and dependencies) to better reflect realistic expectations.

Plus, any good system should allow limited use and application, whether it’s the number of users or the volume of policies you’re choosing to model, with further scaling-up possible as your conversion process is evaluated, refined and optimized. You should never be required to make an all-or-nothing bet that you will be able to achieve a positive ROI on your investment in a new system.

Make the Investment in Actuarial Talent Pay Off
ASA and FSA credentials represent a significant investment of time (to study) and money (exam fees, study seminars, etc.). This is a two-sided investment, in that both the candidates and their employers have dedicated significant resources to achieve that credential. Having tools that allow those actuaries to harness that intellectual capital they have worked so hard and long for is an absolute must.

If you ask someone to do high-level work—optimization of a decades-long investment strategy for your block of multiyear guaranteed annuities, for example—and give them simplistic tools (e.g., Excel), are they going to be effective? Are they even going to be happy? Would they feel trusted and valued for their contribution?

Will they be working at the top of their credential?

Giving actuaries access to the best software and hardware that allow them to actually implement their knowledge is a payoff for both the actuary (greater job satisfaction, more time on task, less mental energy displaced on nonactuarial tasks) and the employer (faster processing, more robust analysis and greater longevity and tenure of talent).

To be frank, most actuaries didn’t get into this profession to be software programmers. That’s why a modern actuarial system is necessary for them to do their best work.

Without one, actuaries may be forced to spend time on tasks they’re overqualified for (building spreadsheets or babysitting models as they churn) or just not skilled enough at (programming or debugging IT errors).

That’s almost like hiring a very expensive courier who is doing nothing more than shifting data from one place to another in an endless cycle.

CONCLUSION
There is clearly a multitude of ancillary benefits that come from model conversion. The visible, system-synchronous benefits are easy to quantify. You’ll have newer tools for cash flow modeling; you’ll probably have access to cloud-based processing and you will often get the capability to handle whatever regulatory regime you have to report under.

These bonuses are less technological and relate to being better actuaries: clear understanding of your models (and the risks therein), greater robustness across your team and company, and a mindset that recognizes the value that actuaries bring to the table.

Far from being a headache and an intimidating challenge, model conversion can be seen as an opportunity. It’s a chance to advance your practice and achieve a significant return on your investment in both your actuarial software and your actuaries themselves.

As a result, conversion to a new or upgraded system just may be an incredibly sensible business decision.
The Importance of Centralization of Actuarial Modeling Functions, Part 4
DevOps and Automated Model Governance

By Bryon Robidoux

This is the fourth and last article dedicated to providing guidance and a road map for centralizing modeling within the organization. This series shows how simple overlooked behaviors, which appear harmless at the lowest level of the corporation, are causing tons of organizational complexity, time and money when aggregated across the organization.

In Part 1 of this article, software engineering principles were used to show that decentralizing models comes with extremely high cost. It showed that centralization of a modeling department is a step in the correct direction, but it is not enough. The key to running a smaller, better, faster and cheaper modeling department is to focus on modularity and work-product reuse according to software engineering principles. Part 2 introduced the reader to the major components of DevOps and how it is the basis for actuarial modernization. Part 3 explained how to build a data-driven Axis model for the most amount of data reuse and automation possible. Lastly, this article addresses how to use DevOps with the Formula Table code within Axis to increase the quality of the models and the throughput of new enhancements to help overcome the monolithic-system problem. It will do so by focusing on the tools used to implement a full stack of DevOps for Axis model code.

Even though specific tools are mentioned in this article, it is not an endorsement. These are tools that I have used in the past and am familiar with. It also makes the explanation less abstract to use actual tools as examples. It is highly recommended that readers research other tools before jumping on board with the tools mentioned. Your IT department is probably already using these types of tools and should be consulted.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Let us step back and look at the big picture on what these articles have been trying to accomplish. A colleague explained that there are two types of models: thick and thin. A thick model is when all the work is performed and stored inside the model. A thin model is created when all work is performed and stored external to the model. Furthermore, only at the last possible minute before runtime is the model assembled and executed.

The thick model is the root cause of the monolithic-system problem. These previous articles explained that current actuarial modeling practices create models that are as thick and dense as the Messier 87 black hole.

The real goal should be to create models that are razor thin. Thin models promote building reusable components so that the organization can achieve economies of scale by maximizing work-product reuse and using Agile project management. Therefore, they promote the consolidation of the modeling function.

Thin models are important because they allow actuaries to use the best tools for the job so they can efficiently build robust processes and models. They allow the modeling platform vendors to stay concentrated on building software, where they have a competitive advantage. Modeling vendors should strive to make third-party DevOps tools as easy as possible for actuaries to use so that their work products seamlessly plug into the
IT infrastructure. This will give actuaries and IT the ability to work harmoniously together to achieve new levels of efficiency. This will promote the entire organization to implement continuous testing, integration, development, deployment and other DevOps practices. An organization that could pull this off would dominate the industry because it could make more informed decisions and execute faster.

AXIS BACKGROUND
Non-Axis users may need a frame of reference for its two major components: E-Link and the dataset. E-Link’s main goal is to manage the collection of the organization’s models and orchestrate their execution. It has a very Windows Explorer feel. E-Link can be automated with scripts to externally manipulate datasets and customize orchestration using Axis Jobs and E-Link scripts, respectively. One of the most important enhancements to E-Link in the past three years or so is Formula Link. This extension allows users to create reusable libraries that can be shared among multiple models and E-Link scripts.

Formula Link was a necessary enhancement that allows the outside world’s libraries to be referenced from within the Axis world and shared among all datasets. I highly prefer Axis because all its customization uses the Microsoft .NET language. This opens a whole new world of possibilities because a plethora of DevOps tools become immediately available once the code is extracted and then referenced through Formula Link. With a little creativity and planning, it is possible to make a thin model.

There are two types of custom code in an Axis: code that heavily interfaces with Axis and mostly stand-alone calculation code. The former should stay in code snippets in Formula Link for maximum reuse and is beyond the scope of this article. The latter is where this article is targeting because it can be transformed into external reusable libraries. These libraries can use the full stack of DevOps tools that IT uses.

CODE EXTRACTION
The first step of thinning the model is externalizing all the formula table code to a Dynamic Link Library (DLL) with an integrated development environment (IDE), such as Visual Studio, outside of the model and Moody’s environment. DLLs are no harder to write than a code snippet in the Axis dataset. Given that Axis uses VB.NET as its preferred language, the formula tables can be moved over to Visual Studio library solution with ease. It all depends on how much the calculations are tied to functions on the Input, Output and Common tabs of the formula table in Axis.

The code remaining in the formula table should be only what is defined as pump-and-dump code. It should be the minimal amount of code possible to pump data out of the formula table input variables, shove into the external library or libraries and dump back into Axis output variables. The less code that exists in the formula tables, the more automated unit testing and user acceptance tests (UAT) that can be performed and the more stable the model will be to change. (For a more detailed article on how to clean up formula tables while data is being extracted, read “Building a Modularized and Reusable Formula Table Code in Moody’s Axis Using Formula Link.”)

CONTINUOUS TESTING
NUnit allows the developer to write automated tests that can be run in and out of the IDE all external of Axis; once the code is in the Axis model, it becomes much harder and time consuming to test and find problems. By testing in the IDE using Axis, the developer can get feedback in milliseconds instead of minutes, hours or days.

Actuaries should strive to perform test-driven development (TDD). TDD requires that the developers, testing team and stakeholders supply data and tests that the developer must pass before the code can be developed for and released to the Axis model. The test becomes part of the design process at the beginning of the project instead of an afterthought on the back side after development is complete. This greatly speeds up the development cycle because stakeholders cannot produce a list of impossible requirements. They must provide the tests for validating requirements, which leads to a conversation about feasibility. Further, this forces the model design to be modular, so that all functionality can be easily tested. This mode of working works nicely within an Agile project management framework. Once the testing team receives the library, it can focus on integration testing to make sure the model and libraries are working together properly.

To better perform model life cycle practices and testing, it is recommended to use SpecFlow with NUnit for behavior-driven development (BDD). BDD aims to create a shared understanding of how an application should behave by discovering new features based on concrete examples. Key examples are then formalized with natural language, called Gherkin, following a given/when/then structure. SpecFlow helps teams bind automation to feature files and share the resulting examples as living documentation across the team and stakeholders. To produce nice-looking testing documentation, Pickles can be used along with SpecFlow. Pickles is a living documentation generator: it takes your specifications (written in Gherkin, with Markdown descriptions) and turns them into an always up-to-date docu-
mentation of the current state of your model or software and in a variety of formats. Results produced by Pickles become documentation and communication to auditors, controllers and validators on how each unit of the model must behave.

**REFACTORING**

Now that testing is set up, it is time to clean up the code! JetBrains Resharper is a Visual Studio plug-in for refactoring code and making it easier to read, abstract and organize. Refactoring should never be done as a separate project. It should be done every time the code is touched. Now that the unit tests are available, the developer can move around code and change the model without worrying about changing results. Code and models are just like bushes: They need to be constantly pruned and maintained in order stay looking their best. Otherwise, they will get unruly and it will require a large job to get back in order.

**AUTOMATED STANDARDS ENFORCEMENT**

All aspects of the model should have standards that are followed. Standards enforcement and code review are very manual and tedious processes inside the Axis model. Visual Studio has another plug-in called SonarLint, which statically analyzes code for standards compliance and coding styles that will potentially cause bugs. It will enforce that the actuaries’ code is written to the corporate IT standards. This plug-in boils a one- or two-week code review process down to one minute! This also makes sure that standards are uniformly applied across the organization. This reduces the slower manual standards enforcement processes to the bigger-picture architecture issues and avoids manual standards on the high-velocity minutiae.

**DOCUMENTATION**

Now that the code is better, cleaner, tested and up to standards, it is important to document it. This is where a plug-in like VSDocman will come in handy. In Visual Studio, if you use three comment characters in a row, it will generate XML tags categorized by common types of documentation. VSDocman will use these XML tags to generate professional-looking documentation that resembles Microsoft’s code documentation. There is even a switch to allow the actuary to include the code with the documentation, so the library calculations are completely transparent. (These documentation XML tags are also available in Formula Link, but there is no utility like VSDocman within Axis to export them, unfortunately.) VSDocman has a stand-alone application that accepts command-line parameters, so it can be called independently of Visual Studio to generate documentation and export to a wiki.

Now that the code is cleaned up and documented, it needs to be version controlled.

**VERSION CONTROL**

Git and GitHub were created so open-source developers could collaborate on writing code, regardless of location. GitHub is the graphical user interface that sits on top of Git to make it more user friendly. Git handles the versioning and pushing and pulling changes to the server. It has everything an actuary could want for controlling code and tracking changes in repositories. All modern IDEs will have plug-ins to make Git easy to use for the most common tasks. Git has built-in model steward functionality, called a pull request, to sign off and approve changes to a development branch before it can be merged to the master branch. The changes can be annotated so everyone can get a clear understanding of their purpose.

**TRACKING WORK**

JIRA allows all members of the modeling team to track the progress of a project and its development tasks. They have many canned reports, which makes adopting Agile project management much easier. The actuary can put any files, comments, decisions or other information that are relevant to the task into a ticket. This ties together the evolution of the code with the evolution of the task that created it. It is very handy to go back and look at the JIRA to find all the details on why a set of changes occurred in the code and how ambiguities in requirements were resolved.

**CONTINUOUS INTEGRATION**

Now it is time to integrate the DLL library with the model. All the Visual Studio plug-ins I explained earlier, except Resharper, can be executed in a server environment in a DevOps pipeline, such as Jenkins Pipeline. Jenkins Pipeline—with the execution of a script—will:

- download the library’s repository from GitHub,
- compile it,
- version it,
- execute the review with SonarLint’s companion SonarQube, and
- run all unit tests and UAT.

These are the same unit tests built into the Visual Studio project. Once the code passes all the automated review and automated tests, the pipeline will:

- generate the documentation with VSDocman and update the wiki,
- store the DLL in a work product repository like Artifactory, which in turn makes them available in NuGet Package Manager,
- move the DLL from the insurance organization to the Moody’s environment,
- use an E-Link script to import the DLL into a Formula Link library, and
- use E-Link to import the Formula Link library into a dataset.

This will make using the external DLL library as seamless as if it were a code snippet created in Axis. To link external libraries through Formula Link, there is a little setup required.
1. The DLL and its dependencies must be stored within a folder within the Formula Link library.

2. The AssemblyInfoAndReferences file inside the Formula Link library must be modified with the following comment-ed line:

   `REFERENCE_DST\folder\your.DLL`, where

   - `REFERENCE_DST` is an Axis keyword,
   - `folder` is the name of the folder in the Formula Link library, and
   - `your.DLL` is the name of DLL to be called from the Formula Link library.

The AssemblyInfoAndReference file is what makes this article possible. It is the most valuable feature of Formula Link!

**CONTINUOUS DEPLOYMENT**

When deploying changes, there needs to be:

- user-based privileges in Jenkins,
- landing locations in the Moody’s environment and
- Formula Link libraries for each development, QA and production environment.

For example, if a developer built a development branch of a library in Jenkins, it would land in a development folder in the Moody’s environment, be loaded into the development Formula Link library and be loaded to a development dataset. A tester would have the same process, but the library would be moved to the equivalent QA instances. Once QA is finished, only the head model steward can approve the pull request into the master GitHub branch and build the master branch on Jenkins. The library would then land in the production folder in the Moody’s environment, be placed in the production Formula Link library and be loaded into the master dataset. There needs to be a Formula Link library for each environment; otherwise, all the development, QA and production changes would be stacked on top of each other. This is annoying to maintain and does not scale well.

**CONCLUSION**

It is important to externalize the code and build libraries to eliminate the monolithic-system problem. But once there is an effort to do this, as the article demonstrates, the massive quantity of software engineering tools at the actuary’s disposal will make development much easier by automating unit tests, UAT, refactoring, documentation, enforcement of standards, integration and deployment of code into the Axis dataset. All these enhancements will speed up throughout of model features, immensely improve model governance and make the development way more agile.

The third-party tools mentioned in this article are used by millions of developers, so they are robust and easy to use. They are constantly enhanced to improve the efficiency of developers. It is important that actuaries have the same access to these tools to make them as efficient as possible. Somewhere, somehow and someway, actuaries have diverged from using software engineering tools. It is imperative that we close this gap sooner rather than later to manage the changes instigated by competition and regulation.

Bryon Robidoux, FSA, CERA, is an actuary at The Standard. He can be reached at bryon.robidoux@standard.com.

**TECHNOLOGY WEBSITES**

- Artifactory. [https://jfrog.com/artifactory/](https://jfrog.com/artifactory/)
- Confluence. [https://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence](https://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence)
- Git. [https://git-scm.com/](https://git-scm.com/)
- GitHub. [https://github.com/](https://github.com/)
- JIRA. [https://www.atlassian.com/software/jira](https://www.atlassian.com/software/jira)
- NuGet Package Manager. [https://www.nuget.org/](https://www.nuget.org/)
- NUnit. [https://nunit.org/](https://nunit.org/)
- ReSharper. [https://www.jetbrains.com/resharper/?fromMenu](https://www.jetbrains.com/resharper/?fromMenu)
- SonarLint. [https://www.sonarlint.org/](https://www.sonarlint.org/)
- SonarQube. [https://www.sonarqube.org/](https://www.sonarqube.org/)
- SpecFlow. [https://specflow.org/](https://specflow.org/)
- Vsdocman. [https://www.helixoft.com/vsdocman/overview.html](https://www.helixoft.com/vsdocman/overview.html)