

In Search of the Entrepreneurial Actuary
by Sandi Coyne-Westerkamp

Recently I traveled to Phoenix, Arizona and Seattle, Washington to attend both of the Society of Actuaries' Spring Meetings. I had a specific purpose: to find and discuss the concept of entrepreneurial activity and the potential this would possibly hold for actuaries. Like any entrepreneur, I analyzed my original offerings in Phoenix and refined the presentation further for Seattle.

As a presenter on a variety of topics involving entrepreneurship, I have spoken to different groups of people and have always encountered some resistance. Though we all know someone who owns his or her own business, we seem to believe this person possesses some sort of superhuman DNA that has enabled them to get past the problems. Perhaps he or she did not "leap tall buildings in a single bound," but this superhuman individual certainly did not seem to be impacted by the possibility of loss that considering entrepreneurship always seems to bring up.

Undaunted by the concern that actuaries, like other people, will certainly express the same issues about pay, vacation and lifestyle, I pressed on. I set out to really understand actuaries and to explore the potential for an entrepreneurial actuary. Luckily I had access to a number of Society of Actuaries' documents and I began to ponder phrases like "practitioners of the art of the practical." I came to realize that I did not really know in my heart if there was an entrepreneurial actuary. I asked myself if my search for the entrepreneurial actuary was real, and if so, how could I find out more about these individuals?

The Entrepreneurial Actuary Does Exist

I found a wonderful site, a blog by self-professed entrepreneurial actuary Jawwad Farid, who challenged actuaries to consider the reluctance to accept the role of the entrepreneurial actuary. Farid points out that as a result of their training, actuaries are uniquely positioned to not only identify and quantify, but manage the risks of becoming an entrepreneur. Buoyed with this new knowledge, I developed a two segment presentation that focused on the entrepreneurial actuary. My goals were to welcome the term "entrepreneurial actuary" and identify the critical areas of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial activity the actuary in any environment was ready to hear about and ponder.

The first session considered the innovation and creativity that is part of the corporate entrepreneurial experience. Critical to this discussion was the point that some top management is not fond of corporate entrepreneurs, because they have not found a sound means to evaluate and reward creativity in the workplace. The discussion also included the fairly new concept of opening creativity in "increments," a more evolutionary approach that does not often fly in the face of senior management. A creative corporate employee must still be careful. Looking at your work environment in terms of creativity requires starting

at the top; if senior management does not view seeking alternatives to current procedures, processes or products favorably, they might mistake creativity for insubordination.

In Phoenix several actuaries asked me why would anyone become an entrepreneur and upon reflection, they were right to question. Why would anyone EVER leave a good job, solid income, vacations, health care benefits and security to launch a business with no guarantees? I thought long and hard about this and when I reached Seattle, I worked to show how to balance the pros and cons. The discussion focused on why some people launch their own companies, including dissatisfaction with upper management or the loss of more traditional jobs. Or maybe they want to be able to give themselves a raise. Let's face it—you just can't do that in a traditional role in a company you don't own!

I also provided case histories of three important “accidental entrepreneurs,” who were working on one project when a new product presented itself that could not be ignored. The three products—Slinky, Silly Putty and Post-it® notes—were all based on failures. Through the discussion of the failures, the truth was exposed: there is risk in any attempt but you can't tell what exciting new things might happen. The chuckles were evident as I passed around the products and we discussed the fact that some entrepreneurs seem born, others come to it by accident and others make the conscious choice to find their own way.

Well, those were my first two experiences in searching for the entrepreneurial actuary. I believe my quest was successful; many actuaries have the idea planted in their brains and who knows when that seed might sprout a new career, a new product and a powerful life opportunity. I can't wait to see what happens in the process.

Sandi Coyne-Westerkamp holds a doctorate of management in organizational leadership and teaches entrepreneurial thinking and innovative practice at Bay Path College in Massachusetts. She can be reached at scoyne@baypath.edu for a copy of these presentations and other materials.