

Why I Love Working With Actuaries

RECRUITING—SPECIFICALLY ACTUARIAL RECRUITING—isn't a profession for everyone. According to many of my actuarial resources, the probability of success and happiness as an actuarial recruiter is less than 20 percent. Eighteen years ago, against those odds, I took what many would call a tremendous leap of faith. I joined Jacobson Associates in Chicago as an actuarial recruiter. And I've never once regretted it.

Granted, my credentials included nothing more than a bachelor of arts degree in English from the University of Illinois—Urbana/Champaign, 18 months of experience at Allstate as a management trainee, and a great deal of youthful energy (to which many attribute my acceptance of the role). And though this was 1985, a time when “pocket protector” actuarial jokes were all the rage, I'd never even so much as considered this stereotype or how it might play into my new relationship with the profession. In fact, thanks to my time at Allstate, I had a pretty good idea of what actuaries do and their typical profile in an organization.

During one of my training rotations, I was placed with the group actuary (an FSA), who led the entire group health team. I remember thinking that he was a brilliant, wise, and funny individual. He was also quite patient with me, as I provided claims numbers and very rudimentary analyses. I liked him and learned a lot from him. He didn't teach me how to be an actuary, but he taught me how actuaries make an impact in an organization and on their teams—all the way down to their very “green” management trainees.

Maybe this experience is the reason actuarial stereotypes seemed to bounce off me. Maybe this is why I didn't hesitate about my decision to sign on as an actuarial recruiter. Maybe this is why I was confident that I'd be working with insightful and savvy business professionals (which I do). Maybe this is why I eagerly jumped on the roller coaster that some call the actuarial marketplace and fastened my seatbelt for the ride.

And it sure has been one exhilarating ride. I was there in 1988 when “actuary” was ranked the No. 1 profession

and flexibility displayed as the profession has redefined, reshaped, and marketed itself. I remember the time when few people outside the insurance arena knew what an actuary did for a living, and I was there to see the actuary

in the country in the *Jobs Rated Almanac*. I witnessed the floodgates opening, as everyone wanted to become an actuary. I've been there for the excitement of growth and the frightening reductions in workforce. Likewise, I've been there to observe the incredible resilience

“go Hollywood” with Jack Nicholson, no less, with the release of *About Schmidt*.

As a recruiter, I'm much more than an observer of the marketplace; I'm the voice. Day in and day out I'm called upon to be not only the voice of my client (the hiring company) but also the voice of my candidate (the actuary). It's a delicate balance as we build a trusting relationship and ultimately determine if we do, in fact, “have a match.” This idea includes a career match, a culture match, and a lifestyle match. It may sound

easy, but it's not. The liaison role can be highly sensitive and personal.

It's from this personal aspect that I've gained my greatest insight, perspective, and joy as an actuarial recruiter. Over the years, recruiting has turned into something more than just a transaction, more than business. I've come to know the human aspect of the actuaries I've represented.



MARGARET RESCE MILKINT IS A PARTNER OF THE JACOBSON GROUP AND HANDLES EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT AND ACTUARIAL SEARCHES ON A NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL BASIS FOR THE ORGANIZATION'S RETAINED SEARCH DIVISION, JACOBSON EXECUTIVE SEARCH.

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I've become personally involved in their lives and some have become personally involved with mine. They've opened their homes to me, shared home-cooked meals and wonderful conversation.

They've listened to my suggestions to trade in the cowboy boots for wing-tips before the East Coast interview—and they got the job! And at 8:45 the night before the big interview, when they arrived at their destination but their luggage didn't, together we were able to persuade a mall store to stay open late and find them suitable clothing.

We've even shared parenting ideas, including a discussion on a favorite children's book, *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*. In fact, it was a candidate who gave me the best parenting advice I've received to date: "The greatest gift you can give your child is the gift of roots and wings." That's a piece of advice I'll never forget, part of the human touch that makes my profession so rewarding.

Since 1985, I, too, have joined the fight against actuarial stereotypes. Actuaries do laugh and cry and worry and compete. They experience the same emotions and angst any business professional does. And while these battles are now fewer and far between, they're not over. Perhaps the next time a screenwriter writes an actuary into one of her scripts (Hollywood, are you listening?), she can cast a star like Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt. Why can't Jennifer Aniston, Susan Sarandon, or Meryl Streep be actuaries?

My perspective isn't based on blind faith, nor is it a paid advertisement. It's based solely on personal reflections and experiences gathered over many years. I know that actuaries are business leaders, marketers, problem solvers, and trouble shooters. Their keen instincts and ana-

lytic prowess give them an edge in any discipline. And many of them have developed those innate talents into "user-friendly" business tools that every organization needs on their leadership team. This is what has led me to feel comfortable endorsing a qualified actuary for most positions within an insurance or financial services organization. I've often been known to ask a CEO, a CFO, or even a board of directors, "How about an actuary?"

I've enjoyed watching and participating in the evolution and the humanization of the actuarial profession. I've seen actuaries move up, bend sideways, and leap beyond the boundaries of the actuarial landscape that existed 18 years ago. Today, we still see hiring needs for the financial actuary, the product development marketing actuary, and the chief actuary. But today, the scope and the impact of those roles are very different. The financial reporting actuary could be the chief financial officer; the chief actuary could be the chief risk officer or the risk manager; and the product and marketing actuary could be the chief marketing officer or the product line head with full P&L or even a top agent marketing the product.

This metamorphosis required risk-taking on both sides of the equation. It required hiring skeptics who took a second look at mathematical talent flavored with leadership, drive, and intensity. It took actuaries willing to risk moving away from the traditional path before it was easy or safe to do. The strengths actuaries offer do need to be marketed, fine-tuned, and re-

branded, but actuaries have come a long way. The future is more than bright, and in a world hungry for protection, who better to "serve and protect" than the actuary?

As I look back on my amazing roller coaster ride thus far, it's the actuaries themselves who have enriched my career and my life over the past 18 years and taught me how to be an actuarial recruiter. They've touched my heart as well as my mind. I've found them to be inspiring teachers, who have taken time to explain new trends in annuity product development to me and my staff.

I've had the honor of dancing at a few of their weddings. I've served as a confidant when their burgeoning careers and growing families caused them to struggle with work/life balance issues. I've even helped one find a midwife. I've shared the pride of a brand new FSA after 15 years in the industry. And one of my clients, now an FSA, was once an actuarial recruiter at Jacobson!

I've listened to their Harley-riding stories. I've talked to their sons and daughters about joining the actuarial profession. I watched in awe as people I knew survived the World Trade Center disaster, and I mourned the loss of those who left us far too early in life.

Eighteen years ago, I took a leap of faith to serve the actuarial profession as a facilitator, a resource, a coach, and a problem solver, and I beat the odds. I'm a proud member of the 20 percent of actuarial recruiters who have survived and thrived within the profession.

Here's to the next 18 years together—wherever they may take us.

