



“I believe that there are so many opportunities for actuaries who have a twist of creativity and that’s the key. ”

**Laura Bennett**

Principal, Gosling's Leap, FSA

## A CERA working in wider fields

At the beginning of my career, it was pretty typical traditional actuarial development. I was an actuarial student at a large life and health insurance company in Toronto and that’s what got me excited about actuarial science. I was a summer student and so committed to it full-time. I worked there for 12 years. I had excellent experience; the company loved me, I loved them, I went to Ireland for four years with them and qualified as an actuary. I really enjoyed the actuarial science aspect, the technical nature of it. I’m very curious, so I love applying the actuarial ideas to different problems. I was often assigned to places that needed to be fixed or to be built from scratch and I was able to really build on my creativity when I was there.

### **What was your thinking as you were considering the next phase of your career?**

After a decade of doing that, actually the year 2000 was coming up and I was thinking about my career, what was I going to do with my life and I realized that I actually wanted to run a company. I also realized that the company I was at, a large life and health insurance company, didn’t really suit my nature. I thought about what I was going to do about that because I’m a very loyal person and loved where I was at but also realized it wasn’t going to work for me in the long term. I assumed I needed to get out of insurance so I committed to getting an MBA and ended up at the Wharton School of Business.

When I was there, a friend’s cat got sick and she spent over five thousand dollars on her cat, which back in 2001 was a

lot of money and that was even after a student discount. She said to herself “Gosh, I should have had pet insurance”. She’d come directly from the United Kingdom to go to Wharton and when she looked at what was available because she hadn’t had it (insurance) for that particular incident, she realized that what was available in the US was very minimal and very poorly done, particularly compared to the United Kingdom, where, at the time, twelve percent of cats and dogs were insured and she had insurance before she’d come, she just hadn’t picked it up in the US, where less than half a percent cats or dogs were insured and only maybe three brands available at the time.

She had come to Wharton to build a company and she thought maybe a pet insurance company would be a good place to start. So, long story short, four of us put together a business plan for the business plan competition on the concept of pet insurance and in 2003 we put that forward.

In the research of doing that I realized that here was something that I could create from scratch because there was no actuarial science applied to pet insurance. It was a very naively priced product and very poorly done and I thought, this is an opportunity for me to apply actuarial science to a growing industry with high potential but could really use an actuarial touch. I was very much more interested in the total picture, the holistic picture of pet insurance: the customer experience, the pet parent experience, the actuarial science. Feeling that we could have a product that would fit for everybody, that you could make money on but actually work.

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Anyway, we won the business plan competition and graduated in 2003. I decided that this was something I really wanted to do and I didn't realize I was going to run my own company with two people in it to start but it's been an incredibly rewarding experience.

#### **Do you have a team of actuaries working for you now?**

I've since left Embrace but that's after 14 years of running it. We have an actuarial student and an actuarial analyst working at Embrace and we partner with an insurance company and they have a team that focuses on pet insurance. It's actually a property casualty product, so during my time at Embrace I've had to learn how to speak property casualty because it's quite different than life and health. There's quite a difference between the mentality of property casualty which tends to be much more short-term and it has a completely different set of terminology and perspective than life and health which tends to be the hundred-year perspective and a very different way of looking at things, so that has been an interesting crossover for me.

#### **As you look out at the broad landscape, where are some other untapped opportunities for actuaries? What sort of business areas or other areas do you think are calling for that skill set and that way of thinking?**

I believe that there are so many opportunities for actuaries who have a twist of creativity and that's the key. I do think that our traditional training has been to follow a lot of rules because that's what we have to work with in many cases, but the skills that actuaries have allow us to take unformed data and create insights from that, which allows us to do so many things. Within insurance right now there's a whole revolution taking place, whether you've noticed it or not, and I suppose you might call it the 'Insurtech revolution'. I think actuaries can have a huge impact on that because it's not just a case of minimizing processes, it's actually also a case of having insight into the policy holder, the pet parent equivalent, someone out there who is trying to interact with your company. I think actuaries can really bring insight of the data and the information to insight in the person, the human being on the other side and that is the new frontier that I think actuaries can have a really big impact on.

#### **Do you see any challenges or obstacles in getting there? Are there people who don't accept or realize or understand what it is that actuaries can bring to their organisation? Are there some people in the C-suite who**

#### **don't think of actuaries in that way?**

I think the one big hurdle for actuaries being involved in this sort of new frontier is the actuaries themselves. Yes, there are challenges with other people's perceptions of actuaries but the fact is that's not their problem, that's yours. That's something that as actuaries we have to get out there and show what actuaries can do. Actuaries can be very creative and insightful so go ahead and do that, go and push into projects and roles that you know actuaries typically don't do but you can see that you will bring a lot of value. Don't be worried about not having done it before, that's kind of irrelevant. Just to bring your natural skills and creativity and your curiosity to a role and people soon forget you're an actuary and it won't really matter either way.

#### **When people think of actuaries, should they think of them as risk analysts or analysing risk?**

Actuaries as risk analysts is an interesting concept because there is the data aspect. Actuaries are very good at being technical with data and that's obviously a huge benefit these days. Not so many people can use data as it is but actuaries can really understand what it is and what it means. I think there's a big benefit to actuaries looking at data because it's the value add, it's the insights that really matter, that's what's very important.

#### **Actuaries who are thinking about ways to expand their knowledge, their insights what would you advise them to do? You pursued an MBA, for instance; are there other credentials that people might want to pursue if they're looking to broaden their opportunities professionally?**

I believe that actuaries can enhance their credentials. I got an MBA, I felt that I needed it for many reasons not just the learning, it helped expand me into a whole different area. I believe that if you're trying to get into a domain then it's handy to help yourself to have whatever credential is required for that domain. For example, I work with the investment department in my insurance company and so I became a CFA because that was something that they respected but it also taught me a lot about their business, so there are many reasons for it. Having a CERA designation I think is something that's much more helpful going forward if you're going to look at technical work in an insurance company perspective and outside of insurance and that's something that people are understanding more and more.