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## **Actuaries and the Law of the Jungle**

### **Hiring Good Candidates for Life-Long Career Growth**

**By Eynshteyn Averbukh**

I was amazed to learn that large, strong elephants are able to stay quietly tethered to a small stake. Why is that? As it turns out, when the elephants are small and tied to the same stake, they try to pull it out but fail. When they grow large they never try to pull out the stake again. This parable reminds us that we should always try to achieve our full potential and not limit ourselves only to what we were able to do in the past. This applies to actuaries; we need to learn and grow throughout our careers, not just in the early years when we take exams. And employers look for candidates who are eager to learn and able to meet the high standards of the actuarial profession. The insurance industry has a strong demand for actuarial candidates and offers them high growth potential.

#### **Actuarial Development Program**

John Hancock Financial has an actuarial development program (ADP) where candidates gain knowledge and well-rounded experience while rotating through different lines of business, including individual life insurance and annuities, long-term care insurance, group pensions, reinsurance, financial reporting, investments, risk management, corporate development, and marketing.

The company's goal is to develop successful future managers and highly qualified insurance engineers. To this end, the company supports ADP members who are taking actuarial examinations (exam fees, books, preparation classes, study time) and expects them to make steady progress toward the Fellow, Society of Actuaries (FSA) designation. John Hancock is looking not just for the number crunchers (though the numbers must be correct and produced on time). The company needs actuaries who:

- communicate well with senior management, investment analysts, and regulators;
- see the big picture but are attentive to details;
- can work independently and as part of the team;
- can effectively manage others;
- have savvy business, financial, and technical skills to succeed in the 21st century.

#### **Actuarial Summer Internship Program**

John Hancock Financial has a process for attracting and recruiting the right candidates. The company runs the Actuarial Summer Internship Program, one of the best in the Boston area.

Actuarial interns are assigned to various areas for 12 weeks and gain valuable experience. They also attend weekly seminars where they meet ADP members, actuaries, and other insurance professionals. Summer internship helps them learn first-hand about the actuarial profession and insurance industry. The best interns are our primary candidates for permanent positions with ADP.

Actuarial recruiters in the company human resources department also receive many resumes, which they try to match with available actuarial positions. Interviews occur in January in February for the upcoming summer.

### Application and Selection

As a global company, John Hancock Financial is looking for candidates with diverse backgrounds who have good quantitative and communication skills, are well-rounded, and show great potential. Nowadays, more companies (John Hancock included) encourage candidates to apply directly on-line rather than through specialized recruiting agencies; increased efficiencies of recruiting are the realities of today. This approach offers several advantages:

All applicants' data are automatically entered in the application tracking system, which enables a search for necessary skills, background, and level of education.

The candidates have a direct and more immediate contact with the company actuarial recruiters.

John Hancock does not have to pay a third-party recruiter a fee for hiring the candidate. (The company has strong working relationships with specialized actuarial recruiters but prefers to use them for higher level actuarial searches.)

When searching the resumes, John Hancock recruiters pay attention to the number of actuarial exams passed, the level and quality of education (GPA of at least 3 out of 4), relevant courses and experience (internship, projects in school), and technical and communication skills.

Usually, semi-finalists are contacted by phone first and then, as finalists, they're invited for a full-scale job interview which lasts at least half-a-day. At the interviews a competency model is often used: Interviewers ask questions to understand how candidates would perform on the job, assessing teamwork, flexibility, communication skills, analytical skills, and enthusiasm. Very often there is no right or wrong answer. The ways in which candidates approach questions and think on their feet help interviewers select the best person for the job.

Some words of general advice. While at school, learn more about the actuarial profession, select relevant courses to help you pass actuarial exams, and satisfy the validation by educational experience (VEE) requirements.

### How To Find a Full-Time Actuarial Position

First, try to identify the sector in which you'd like to work as an actuary (insurance

industry, consulting, or government) and the track (SOA vs. CAS).

Research selected companies or insurance departments and see if you find a strong desire to work there.

Σ Take advantage of networking (professors at school, alumni, open houses, job fairs, friends, and family). Use actuarial discussion forums on the Internet to expand your sources. Some sites, such as [www.soa.org](http://www.soa.org) or [www.actuary.ca](http://www.actuary.ca), offer actuarial discussion forums.

Apply for actuarial internships. It's a great way to learn and often a shortcut to the permanent position.

When applying, keep in mind that your cover letter is a prime tool for getting the employer's attention. Give a brief summary of your abilities and interests, and explain why you're applying for this particular job.

Your resume is another vital tool. The resume should be a one- or two-page summary of your skills, education, experiences, and accomplishments designed to capture the prospective employer's interest. Include a clear objective statement at the top and make it easier for the reader to pick out specific skills by selecting appropriate categories.

Be ready for an initial phone interview with the first gate keeper, usually from the human resources department. At the second interview, you face prospective managers and co-workers.

When comparing offers from different places, consider the total package: work environment, benefits (health, pension, time off), actuarial program (study time allowance, preparation classes and seminars), diversity of experience available through the rotation program and growth opportunities once an FSA designation is achieved.

The actuarial profession needs many good people. Use the information in this article to launch yourself into a full-time job in this rewarding profession.

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