

Actuarial skills in South Africa

The editorial team interviewed Tjaart Esterhujse and asked him several questions on skills and the comparison between The Netherlands and South Africa.

Until December 2023, you were the President of the Actuarial Society of South Africa and South Africa is renowned for its actuarial standards. What are the strong points of South African actuaries? What can Dutch actuaries learn from them?

"South Africa is a country with many facets, specifically its income disparity. We operate in an economy that has first and third world characteristics. Politically it has been unstable, and addressing the wrongs of the past has been foremost in most of what's around us. That makes South African actuaries very solution focused and pragmatic, making the most of what we have. It also makes us innovators, as you must find solutions where there may not be a precedent."

Which technical skills do you consider important for the future of the actuarial profession? Which changes should we make to accommodate expected changes?

"The evolution of data analytics and artificial intelligence has made it more and more important for actuaries to stay up to date with emerging technologies. Actuaries have always been data scientists, that's core to our skills. But the amount of data and the tools available to make sense of it have exploded exponentially. That is both an advantage and a disadvantage, as we can get mired into data analytics for the sake of it. Actuaries will need to be good at using data for a practical use case. It needs to make sense and add something new to what we do in a way that adds real economic value. I guess one could say that common sense should always prevail!"

Do you have any suggestions for actuaries to better prepare themselves to take on leadership roles?

"When I started my actuarial career, actuaries were not necessarily thought of as having leadership skills. But the profession has evolved dramatically since. I have been lucky to have had the opportunity to start managing a small team early on in my career, and it grew from that. Along the way I was exposed to leadership training that helped me grow. I have never been very good at reading self-improvement books, but those that I have been exposed to during leadership training have always added to my skill set. Reading up on what behaviours leaders exhibit will help actuaries know which areas in their own growth to focus on. And do not be afraid to go for leadership positions even if you do not feel ready yet, being challenged is what makes you grow."

On your experience as a reinsurance actuary and executive: which skills do you find important for actuaries to be successful in the reinsurance industry? How does this compare to other areas of the actuarial practice?

"The reinsurance industry characteristics can be very market particular. In the South African market relationships are still important, but this needs to be backed up by delivery. So yes, I have played my share of bad golf with clients, entertained many in seminars, dinners and cocktails. But that would not help if you are not trustworthy. My team and I focused on excellence in delivery, making sure our actions match our words and being authentic in our interactions, even to the point of saying to a client 'that really is not a good idea'. As an executive I had



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to develop my softer skills, how to interact with staff in a way that they feel valued and heard. The book that I valued most in my leadership journey is *The Speed of Trust* by Steven Covey Jr. To be trusted you must be competent and display the right character/behaviour. It is worth getting a copy of that."

Your career has been international, even intercontinental. Are there any differences standing out when comparing countries?

"That's an interesting question. And yes, different countries have different cultures and ways of doing things. But that is trumped by the corporate culture of the multinational company you work for. The company I worked for is extremely successful in having a uniform culture across the organisation, and appointed the kind of people that fitted that culture. So when I wanted to do something innovative I could discuss it with someone in Australia or the US, and they would try to help me make it work rather than shooting it down 'because that's not how things are done'."

Which skills do you consider the most beneficial for your career? What advice would you give to young actuaries?

"That would be a combination of open-mindedness, not accepting the norm and solution-mindedness. Consider various possibilities, do not stick to the obvious and listen to other views. I suffer from imposter syndrome, hence I deliberately put myself in challenging positions to prove to myself that I can do it. So the courage to take on more than you feel comfortable with is important. The expected characteristics of integrity, honesty, responsible, accountable, respectful, etc. have to be a given, without those you will be found out no matter what other skills you have." ■