

Actuarial Success with Elayne Grace

Interview Transcript

Julia Lessing: Hi everyone. Today we're talking about building a successful actuarial career. What makes a successful career and what do we need to do to get there? And joining us for this discussion is the CEO of the Actuaries Institute, Elayne Grace. Elayne, welcome to the show.

Elayne Grace: Hello, thanks for inviting me.

JL: Elayne not only are you an experienced actuary with over 25 years of international experience, you're also the CEO of the Actuaries Institute. And for those listeners who are not based in Australia, the Actuaries Institute is our local professional body for actuaries. So, I'm looking forward to hearing more about your journey as the CEO of the Actuaries Institute, but no doubt in that role, you've also seen lots of actuaries do really great things and build successful careers. So, I'm also looking forward to hearing some of your reflections and observations about what successful actuaries have in common.

EG: Great.

JL: But Elayne, let's start with you. You've been the CEO of the Actuaries Institute for about five years now.

EG: That's right, just over.

JL: Just over, coming up for six. So, can you tell us about the day that you found out you were going to be the CEO of the Actuaries Institute?

EG: Sure. So, look, obviously I was very excited. I think I had a clear vision for the actual profession and the Institute that I was very excited about, that actuaries were in demand now and in the future, had a very modern and outward-looking approach, were known for their analytical skills, commercial acumen, public policy outcomes. But of course, also the important historical regulatory roles. So, I had the vision, but you never know, you go through quite a few interviews, you don't know whether they're necessarily buying it.

So, I was very excited. I was very excited knowing that this was it. I could activate and execute that plan and I had great hopes for the future.

JL: So, you had the vision. You wanted the role, but you still weren't quite sure what would happen because you'd actually been acting in the role for a little while beforehand as well, so you knew exactly what you were getting in for.

EG: Well, I was Head of Public Policy before, and then I just did Acting CEO for, I guess, a couple of months. I didn't necessarily ever think, oh, I want to become the CEO of Actuaries Institute. Situations like that often just evolve, arise, you're in the right place when something happens. People certainly encouraged me to go for it. And there was a little bit of an element as a female, I thought I needed to go for it. We need to have CEO or female CEOs up there. I have two daughters. It's important for them to see what's possible.

JL: It's good role-modelling.

EG: And try and achieve that.

JL: Yeah, excellent. And you've achieved some amazing things in your tenure as CEO and looking forward to seeing what you do next.

EG: Oh, thank you. I got the advice, I remember, as long as you don't leave the place in a worse place when you leave, that's a really good starting point. And I think sometimes you can get overwhelmed by too much ambition of, I want to do this, this, and this. And of course, you know, you try and achieve that. But as long as you don't leave it in a worse place, it kind of takes away the fear. I knew I was never going to do that. So, then it's all just building blocks on top and bringing your people with you. That was the most important thing, bringing your people with you. Without people, you've nothing.

So, it was very important for me to make sure that the people in the Institute as the starting point felt empowered, saw the vision and were willing to work with the volunteers and bring them along that journey too in a positive, productive way.

JL: Yep. Yeah. So, it was exciting coming into the role, and you had a clear vision about how to do that and how you wanted to harness the power of your people and also the volunteers of the Institute. I'm sure it hasn't all been smooth sailing in the role of CEO and probably we haven't even seen half of the challenges that you've had to go through behind the scenes.

EG: No. Some interesting ones.

JL: So, Elayne, what's the hardest challenge that you have faced as the CEO of the Actuaries Institute and how did you overcome that?

EG: So, challenges are always interesting. On the one hand, they're difficult, but on the other hand, that's where you learn. That's where you break forward. That's about bringing people together and going, what are we going to do here? How do we solve this problem? So, it can also be a very positive experience. If it's done the right way, it makes you rethink.

So, like I've had a few. Post the Global Financial Crisis, I was working for one of the Big 4 on climate change advisory. The emissions trading scheme fell over. It was not the time to sell business. I've been on expert panels where I've thought that's not the right answer. I'm going to have to stand up for this, even if I'm kicked off the panel this is just not what I believe. And then to my relief, when everybody else went, "Oh, you're right. That's what we're thinking, too!".

And as the CEO in my second year, we had the Royal Commission into Financial Services. That was certainly a very serious review to be going through as part of the Actuaries Institute. And the actuaries did well. Well, we took it very seriously. There were a lot of reflection points for our industry and what role actuaries played in that. But the biggest thing has to be, of course, COVID. So, I remember hearing about it, like everybody, you know, January, February. And then by the time March came, it was like, this is more serious. I remembered we had some actuaries who'd done some work on SARS, the pandemic, a long time before that.

So first of all, it was like, what thought leadership should we be doing on this? How can we be contributing to society? What do we know? But then it kind of started changing. I remember bringing in all the staff one Thursday going, we need to be ready. We need to be agile. And then the Sunday night, we did a ring around. Nobody come into the office.

JL: Stay home.

EG: Then we set up the WhatsApp group with the president. So, we needed to be very quick and agile. Then it was a case of, okay, we've got an All Actuaries Summit, our first one ever, bringing everyone together in the Gold Coast in May.

JL: That's right.

EG: We realised we couldn't do that. We couldn't put our people, and this was in some ways, some of the good things that came out of COVID. A confirmation that the most important thing are your people, your staff, your members, your volunteers. You don't want to put them at risk. And there was so much uncertainty at the time. That was the crazy thing. It was all about doing scenarios on the run. So, we made the decision, we had to cancel that conference and go ahead with virtual because everybody

had been set up. We knew what we were going to do, but we needed to save as much money as possible.

The other thing that was probably more difficult was thinking whether we could run the semester one of exams. At that time, we used exam centres.

JL: Right.

EG: And at that time, they were starting to restrict people's movements. So, there was no guarantee. We looked at the time, can we run it online? It's too important. Integrity is so important. We thought the problems that could exist were too much. And so instead, we took the time to get ready for online exams. It was always in our horizon. We launched for semester two, we had great invigilation with all the systems set up, so we decided to do that instead. But that was hard. For all those people, knowing that they'd studied, they wanted to sit their exam, it was a hard decision to make. So, I think that was one of the biggest things.

The last one, which is later, was ICA 2022. So, we were hosting the International Congress of Actuaries in 2022, and I guess the whole world is like, when is this going to end? We knew that again, that international audiences needed a little bit of time to actually go, I'm going to secure my flights to go to Australia. We didn't want it to be just a domestic event. We wanted to be truly international. By then people were getting a little bit sick of probably hybrid virtual events. So, we made the big decision to delay it a year.

JL: That would have been such a hard decision.

EG: Such a hard decision! I mean, these are financial decisions as well.

JL: Yeah.

EG: My job is to make sure the Institute stays solvent. A lot of associations had very difficult times, especially with the lack of events. They were so reliant on event revenue. So, for me, it was about making sure, first of all, we looked after our people. Then we obviously looked at the business considerations. We still needed to provide a service. We still needed to engage with our members. We still needed to run our business. But then also we needed to look at the financials and actually make sure we run through it.

JL: So many different competing factors that you would have had to assess and trade-off at the time, Elayne. And it's interesting when we think back to that, the early days of the pandemic, I mean, we can look back now, and we know how it played out. But at the time, we didn't know. You know, we were being told, oh, you just need to go work from home for two weeks and flatten the curve. And this will all be over.

EG: Yes, exactly.

JL: So, there was that sense of, well, maybe we just need to do this and then we'll get through it and go back to normal. But, you know, we didn't know at the time how that would play out. So, you were operating on the information that was available to you and still trying to balance the needs of your staff, your volunteers and the students as well. And it sounds like COVID really accelerated that getting exams online as well, which may have been on the horizon but probably wouldn't have otherwise happened as quickly as it did.

EG: And I guess that's what COVID learnt us. Innovation can happen quicker than you think, if you really go for it. So sometimes we create all these processes that would have taken a lot longer, as you said, with regards to technology and bringing things online. The other thing I really hope that we do keep is the importance of our people, the recognition of work-life balance and empowered people. I do believe you need people back in the office a little just to create community and connection, especially just with natural turnover, but it doesn't need to be five days.

You know like what's the balance? Recognising that different people are in different stages of their life and we want to support them. We've got a business to run as well and we've got services to deliver, of course, but also just respecting there's a human behind that as well. I think COVID taught us more about that.

JL: Definitely. So, some great leadership lessons there from your time as a CEO, Elayne. I'm also curious to hear your thoughts or reflections, what you've seen from others in terms of building great actuarial careers, because in your role, you've seen lots of high-profile actuaries. What's one thing that you think they have in common or do differently?

EG: So, I've been very privileged. I've seen the best of the best, I think, and it's always wonderful observing them and seeing how they manage to deliver. So first of all, obviously they're very clever, but they can cut through always to the nub of the problem. Then I think they explain it simply and bring a real human nature element to it. So, they're not just talking technically, or they're bringing, what does it mean? What's the purpose? What's the point of it? They bring it also with energy. They're not very dry. That way people are interested to listen and want to. There's a great inner confidence. You know they know their subject.

They're understanding it and thinking big, but there's a humility, and they're still always listening to others in the room. They don't know, oh, I know the answer, I'm just going to scream you down. They're genuinely listening, bringing people around and have humility. But maybe the most impressive quality is at their core, they've got such an incredible moral compass, and they believe wholeheartedly in public benefit. That is why they're doing it. They're not going to try and push forward an answer that has an agenda for a company or a perspective. They really want the best genuine answer that is pragmatic, that is pragmatic for society, for people, for government, understanding there's a compromise between all of those things to try and get the right answer. So, great privilege to see all of that bundle, you know, naturally in the best of the best.

JL: So, many great reflections there Elayne. So, you know, confidence, seeing people having confidence in what they're doing, but also not arrogant, not steamrolling over other people, still listening and being curious, and being able to explain things clearly and complex concepts. And that's one of those challenges I think many actuaries find is that our work is complex. And so, trying to communicate the results of our work or the 'so what' factor from our work, it takes a bit of rethinking and a bit of planning sometimes because not everyone wants to go on the journey that we've been on to reach our conclusion. They don't want to hear about all of that.

EG: They just want the final answer.

JL: Exactly. They just want the 'so what'. So interesting to hear that you're noticing that those actuaries who have been quite successful have that ability to be able to communicate those complex concepts simply and clearly and effectively as well. And your connection with purpose as well. I think that's a really important one because we need to know why we're coming to work and why we're building a career and why we're working as actuaries. So you can see that purpose is really important too.

EG: That's right.

JL: So, okay. We've heard about your experience as CEO. We've also heard about your reflections of what it looks like for, or what great actuaries who build successful careers have in common. And it sounds like you have some really great leadership skills from what you've described, how you navigated the pandemic with your people as well, and volunteers and so many different stakeholders. But Elayne, what helped you make the transition from being a technical actuary or an individual contributor to a people manager and then the transition from people manager to CEO? How did you make that transition?

EG: So, I guess I'm a natural people type person. I like talking to people.

JL: That's obvious.

EG: So, at one stage it was probably just a natural progression.

JL: Okay.

EG: I managed people, had people underneath me and I loved that. There's nothing greater than explaining what's going on behind an IBNR triangle, or saying, hey, look at these rates, and that's because the hairdresser, this could happen, or this shop, this could happen, and really understanding it, and telling the stories to people and bringing them on that journey. But then I would say, for me, it wasn't just about wanting to keep building teams and having teams underneath me. So, for a while, I went sideways and probably became more of an expert advisory, because the thing that drove me was purpose. I wanted to work in the area of climate change and do a lot of expertise in that. And then I probably didn't have people underneath me, but I was working very collaboratively with people. So, you're kind of doing the same role but without the authority.

So, you're doing it in a different way. Then, well I guess I worked a lot with volunteers and a lot of that was probably again, coordinating, managing to land public policy. And then when the CEO role came up, so I had had experience by that time of building smaller teams, of leading smaller teams, but again, it was just purpose. For me, if there's a reason why I want to do it, what I believe I can contribute that will be the driving force knowing I've got the skills underneath or that I'll learn them. My approach is always very collaborative, but at the same time as CEO, you do need to this decision. And that's my role. That's what I've got to do. I always bring people together to go, what do you think? We brainstorm it out. And then, you know, I can make that decision.

JL: Interesting. So, it wasn't just about building an empire or being the boss or the biggest boss or managing the most number of people. It was about purpose for you. And I really liked hearing how you took a sideways step at some point too. Because I think sometimes as actuaries, we think that our careers need to be linear, we need to be constantly climbing the ladder and taking on more and more responsibility, but I don't think that's the case personally, and you've illustrated that in your career that's not how you approached it either, that you use purpose to make decisions about which step to take next, and that's really paid off for you.

EG: Interest. You've got to be happy in your role, you've got to be getting something out of it, and at different stages of your careers you get different things.

JL: Yep, yep. So, Elayne, I'm going to get a bit abstract here. Because I know you've got a real interest in public policy. And it's not just about the actuarial profession, but about community more broadly.

If you had a magic wand, let's pretend you have a magic wand, and you could change anything about the actuarial profession, what would it be?

EG: So, actuaries do have a lot of inner confidence. But I'm not sure whether they're so great at selling their skills sometimes to a broader audience. Sometimes we can come across as talking about the 20% of risks rather than the 80% of opportunity. So, I think we should become a little bit more management consultant like and understand that concept of the last... like I'm not suggesting ever that you hide all of those issues, but it's more conscious of how you present it. I'm the best person to to deal with this problem. There are loads of issues, but we can handle that together. We can deal with this. That kind of a conversation is really important. It's important as well for actuaries, I guess to move to the slightly next level in terms of assisting with the problem. Don't just stay where you are, but understand, well, what's the broader picture of this? And I think actuaries do it. The question is, are they contributing to that conversation though within their company at that level?

So, take the opportunity to speak to the board or write a paper or speak to other execs about those important issues that are affecting society. Because I think we can bring that analysis. We've got a lot to add. Sometimes we might have self-doubt. Oh, does that person know more? A lot of these difficult problems, there is no one right person. everybody's grappling with it. So, I think actuaries have a lot to

do. So, I would go, if I had the wand, seize the space, go for it and contribute to society because I'm business.

Because you get to a certain age and you realize, well, nobody's going to make this world the world we want it to be. We all have to contribute individually. And so, seize the space and create the business, the community, the society that you want.

JL: I love that. What a great, great quote. Great advice. Thank you, Elayne. So, seize the space and and speak up and make a difference. Wonderful advice. I think we should give you that magic wand. Imagine what we could do if actuaries had the confidence and courage and the communication skills to get out there and really talk about what we're doing and what we think and how we can add value. So I think that's I think that's a great way.

EG: We're all part of the brand of actuaries, and we definitely need to spread it that way. We're all kind of a personal advertisement for actuaries, and we're quite small. So it really is important for all of us to share that expertise, share that value, speak in a positive way. We're all effectively part of that promotional campaign.

JL: Yes, absolutely.

EG: And contribute collectively together.

JL: Absolutely. No, some great advice there today. So, Elayne, it's been wonderful hearing about your experience as a CEO, about how you navigated the pandemic and the various stakeholders that you needed to think about throughout that. It was great to hear your reflection about what you've seen successful actuaries as having in common and their confidence but also their ability to listen and communicate and explain complex concepts.

And it was interesting to hear that purpose was behind your career decisions as you moved up the ladder, so to speak, and taking some sideways steps along the way. And I love what you do with a magic wand to give us all the confidence and courage and communication skills to really shout from the rooftops what actuaries can do and how we can make a difference. But I want to finish with one question, Elayne, and it's this. What's your top tip for actuaries wanting to build a successful actuarial career?

EG: So, as you know by now, I never have one thing. There's always going to be a few. So, I would say the first one is we are in the age of data. It had changed enough before ChatGPT and generative AI, but it really is a transformational time we're in. So read up, be involved in that. You might be busy, you might have the greatest career, but the world is changing at a very fast pace. Believe in yourself. You have the fundamental skills to understand this stuff. Like this is who we are. We're analysts, but we understand. So just pay a little bit of attention.

We're running loads of different events, things that you can get involved in, and read. But I think it's really important for us all to keep up to speed. So, we are the people speaking to the executives who are in those departments. We're part of that change because we've got much more competition now.

The second one is, of course, volunteer for the Institute, it's such an amazing experience. Forgetting about what you give, and you contribute from the personal aspect, you see these amazing people operating, you go, oh, that's how they do that, or you make great connections for future jobs, or if you're in a difficult situation, you'll have people to call. But it's a wonderful experience. And apart from what you actually do for society, for your profession, you get a lot back. So, it also gives you a great platform if you've got a particular interest in stuff.

And that probably leads me to my final one. Find your passion. Everyone's different. Some people are really into, you know, commercial profits. Some people are really into public policy. Some people are really into data science. It doesn't matter. But take the time to really think, what does give me happiness? What do I enjoy doing? And steer your career that way. The great thing about the actuarial profession is you can contribute in so many different ways and people have. And people are



always happy to help. Ring them up, go for a coffee. Somehow, it's not that it's going to be immediate, but somehow steer yourself in that direction.

Write an article, research for a working paper, do an event, and eventually you will get a reputation and will get known for that area, and you'll be able to move into it. So, seize your passion, you only have one life, you've got to enjoy your work, it's clearly part of your life, and you've got great opportunities, so seize that.

JL: Great advice. Thank you so much for your time today, Elayne.

EG: Thank you very much.