

Interviewing With Integrity

“WHAT’S YOUR PERSONAL INTEGRITY STATEMENT?” Does the question catch you off guard, or are you prepared with a solid and concise response? The actuarial community places particularly high value on ethics and integrity. While it can be a sensitive topic, it deserves candid and comprehensive discussion. Today’s workplace has been defined by Enron, Sarbanes-Oxley, and the cry for transparency. As never before, the actuarial community seeks and demands leaders with courage, sound judgment, and unwavering values. In return, leaders expect their employers to hold true to the same values.

According to the Institute for Ethical Business Worldwide, hiring managers rank ethics and personal integrity among the most important attributes in a candidate. However, recent research uncovered that just 5 percent of employers include ethics questions in their interview processes. Today, the interviewing and hiring process is a two-way street. Potential candidates should be scrutinized more than ever, looking beyond technical skills and credentials to ethics, integrity, and overall values. Likewise, candidates should analyze an organization’s moral code and mission statement before agreeing to

come onboard. The ultimate winners are those companies and candidates that are appropriately matched based on their professional and personal codes of ethics.

Defining Professional Integrity

The Code of Professional Conduct, adopted by all five U.S.-based actuarial organizations, clearly outlines expectations of professional integrity. Precept 1 states that “an Actuary shall act honestly, with integrity and competence, and in a manner to fulfill the profession’s responsibility to the public and to uphold the reputation of the actuarial profession.”

Additionally, the American Society of Pension Professionals and Actuaries, the Casualty Actuarial Society, and the Society of Actuaries all have a candidates’ code of conduct to ensure that those pursuing accreditation follow the same ethical code as designated members.

Not surprisingly, job candidates also evaluate a potential employer’s moral code. A distinct corporate brand conveys what a company stands for to its customers, rating agencies, state insurance departments, and current and potential employees. Moreover, it serves as a recruitment and retention tool. A company’s corporate brand should distinguish it from other

organizations by emphasizing character, strengths, and personality. That same brand should also influence the decisions, attitudes, and actions of employees, by promoting corporate citizenship, community and professional leadership, and volunteer involvement. (According to Carol Sears, a member of the Actuarial Board for Counseling and Discipline and principal of the Actuarial Consulting Group, getting involved in volunteer work is one of the best ways for actuaries to stay sharp. It also provides both individual and professional benefits.)

Woven into a brand is the company’s corporate culture, which can be seen in every statement of work or actuarial opinion issued by the company and is daily evident in the elevator, the cafeteria, and the conference room where respect, courtesy, and open communication are the norm.

Exhibiting Professional Integrity

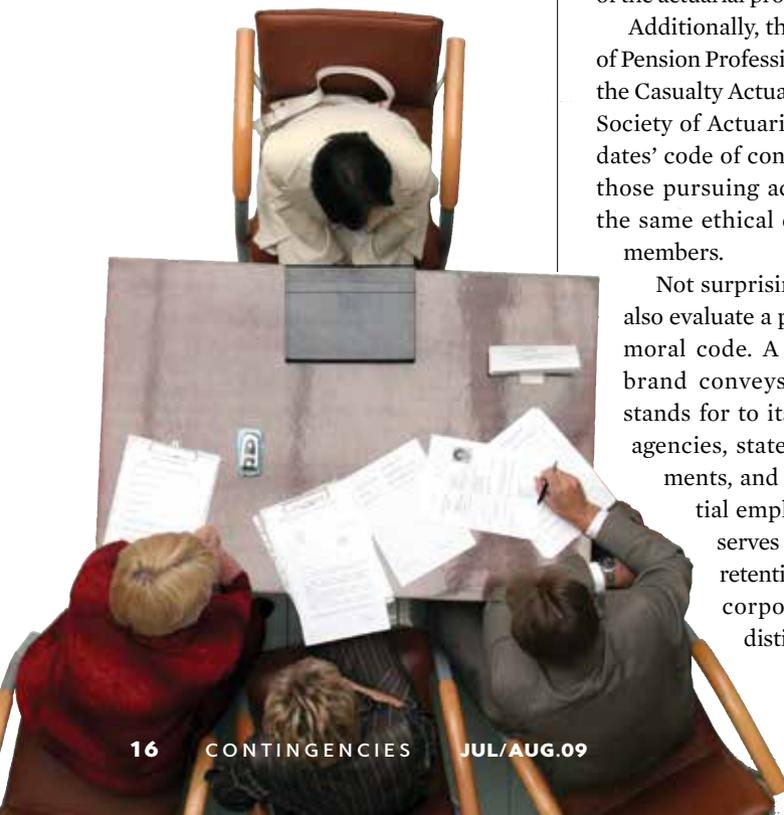
As with personal integrity, professional integrity can’t be turned off when it’s inconvenient.

“Since word-of-mouth references usually include questions about the ‘trust factor,’ the best way a candidate can bring integrity to the interview is to build a reputation for it over his or her whole career,” says Cliff Lange, chief financial officer and chief actuary at Boston Mutual Life Insurance Co.

Whether you’re an employer or a current or potential employee, you need to be cognizant of what your actions tell others. How can you demonstrate integrity both in and out of the interview room?

If you are an employer, you should:

- Employ leaders who exhibit integrity by being consistent, honest, open, and transparent and who are highly skilled at managing people, as well as building strategic relationships both internally and externally;
- Explain to your employees the importance of principles and act on them;



› Support your employees when they are faced with ethical decisions, encourage them to report misconduct, and act on information that's given to you.

If you are a current or potential employee, you should:

- › Discern what's right and wrong, based on principles, and act on your principles, even if there's a business or personal cost;
- › Live the Code of Professional Conduct every day;
- › Pursue professionalism credits as part of your continuing education requirements;
- › Seek guidance from the ABCD when you are in doubt about your actions or the actions of another actuary.

Interviewing With Professional Integrity

The interview process is the time for both job candidates and employers to get acquainted and uncover each other's values, motivations, and ethical codes. Each side should be prepared to both ask and answer questions about ethics.

"There's no explicit integrity check box," says Chris Raham, senior adviser at Ernst & Young. "Rather, we base hiring on the clear match with our firm's value system: teamwork, open-mindedness, accountability, sense of urgency, and trust."

Gregg Schneider, senior vice president of Pan-American Life Insurance Group, agrees. "At this pivotal time in the industry and with the importance of ERM," Schneider says, "we need to focus on integrity."

It's the interviewer's responsibility to distinguish between candidates who are authentic and those who merely recite the "right" answers. The ultimate goal is to reveal the candidate's core elements:

- › Character—what drives the candidate?
- › Outlook—what is his or her approach or style?
- › Relationships—what and who are important to him or her?
- › Expectations—what does he or she expect of the employer and him- or herself?

Techniques exist to help interviewers in accurately and thoughtfully evaluating a candidate. The integrity

check interview is a strategy in which the interviewer asks questions related to how a candidate acted in a particular situation, why he or she acted that way, and how he or she felt about it. Developed by UCLA psychiatrist Mark Goulston, this method is based on the premise that real concentration is required to tell a good lie. Most people cannot keep their stories straight if they have to deal with questions directed to three distinct parts of their brains: action, thought, and feeling.

Another effective method is the behavioral interview. Behavioral interview questions are designed to uncover past behaviors in order to predict future ones. Some examples of questions that can help reveal a candidate's self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and moral fiber include:

- › Give some examples of situations in which you were forced to choose between what was right and what was best for the company. How did you handle them?
- › How would you describe the ethics of your current company? Which areas do you feel comfortable with, and which do you feel uncomfortable with?
- › Have you ever observed someone stretching the rules at work? Have you been in a situation when you had to make something seem better than it really was? Or have you ever felt guilty about receiving credit for work that was mostly completed by others? If so, how did you handle these situations?
- › Do you believe regulations and policies should be followed to the letter or just considered as guidelines?

On the other side of the interview table, job candidates need to review their résumé and rephrase anything that could potentially be misread or misunderstood. As an ethical candidate, you don't want to be caught in what could be construed as a lie. Be confident in your career path, and speak with passion about your true background and credentials.

You should also be prepared to answer behavioral interview questions. Prior to your interview, reread the Code of Professional Conduct and Standards of Practice. Take some time to focus on situations in which you have been faced with an ethical or moral dilemma. Also, ask

about the company's mission statement and corporate values. Solicit specific examples of ways these are demonstrated in the organization, such as:

- › Does the firm have a corporate code of ethics?
- › As a leader in the firm, what keeps you awake at night?
- › How does the company support its employees when they are faced with ethical dilemmas?
- › Does the organization participate in any corporate giving and community outreach programs?

Looking Beyond Words

Actions can speak volumes during an interview. In fact, body language is 65 percent of all communication. From the initial handshake to posture to eye contact, be attentive to what's being said without words. Be aware of any nervous habits, as well as variations in tone of voice.

If you are an employer, train and encourage your hiring managers to pin down clues that a candidate may be dishonest or uncomfortable. If you are a candidate, be aware of vague answers. Ask yourself if the interviewer seems genuine and enthusiastic about the organization's integrity and ethics policies.

No matter which side of the interview table you sit on, finding the right fit is a vital element of any interview. Whether you are interviewing an employer or the candidate for a job, probe for examples of ethics and integrity and ensure that underlying core values are in line with yours. As a professional in the actuarial field, you have the responsibility to invite integrity to the interview. This will enable you to create successful employer-employee matches and mutually beneficial partnerships. □

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