Actuaries Institute.

From earthquake models to AI start-ups: Sam Zheng named 2026 Actuary of the Year

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Serial technology founder Sam Zheng has been named the recipient of the 2026 Actuary of the Year award from the Actuaries Institute, recognising a career that has taken him from pricing motor insurance and modelling natural catastrophes to more than a decade of building artificial intelligence companies in Australia.

The award recognises what Mr Zheng has built in AI and contributed to the startup ecosystem, and what actuarial thinking can offer when it is applied to the hardest problems in technology.

Mr Zheng began his career as an actuarial analyst at Suncorp and Zurich, modelling earthquakes and other natural perils and pricing motor and fleet insurance, before moving into data science at Quantium. He left to build products of his own, teaching himself to engineer along the way.

His approach has mirrored the field itself: try something, learn from it fast, and go again. He co-founded Hyper Anna, an analytics platform that raised A$16 million in Series A funding led by Sequoia China and was later acquired by Alteryx. He then left to start Curious Thing, backed by Westpac's venture arm Reinventure. Curious Thing was a voice AI platform for business phone calls, automating customer conversations across phone and other voice channels for organisations in Australia and abroad. That entrepreneurial spirit to keep building is now channelled into 477 Studio, which Mr Zheng co-leads with Dr Han Xu, his business partner of eight years. 477 Studio builds AI products and provides services to help teams and organisations become AI-native. He is also an active angel investor backing early-stage tech founders.

‘I am honoured to receive this award. It means a great deal because it comes from the profession that shaped the way I think, and I still use that training every single day, just in a very different setting,’ Mr Zheng said.

‘I hope it shows other actuaries how far these skills travel. Actuaries are trained to make high-stakes decisions when the data is incomplete, and that is exactly what building a tech startup feels like. You are working from early signals, and you have to decide and iterate quickly. Working out the product thesis is a risk and systems problem before the actual building work starts. So, if you are an actuary looking at AI or technology and wondering whether you belong in it, you already have the hardest part.’

Actuaries Institute Chief Executive Elayne Grace said: ‘Sam has taken the actuarial mindset out of insurance and put it to work building companies from nothing, in one of the most competitive fields in technology. That mindset, thinking in systems, testing your own assumptions, staying with a hard problem and trying again, is why actuaries have so much to offer as AI reshapes every industry.’

Actuaries Institute President Scott Reeves said: ‘Actuaries are trained to think clearly under uncertainty, and that is exactly what businesses need as they adopt AI. Sam shows what is possible when actuaries take that thinking into the industries shaping the future.’

Mr Zheng’s win comes as the Actuaries Institute continues to invest in equipping members for an AI-driven world, including through its Data Science and AI Practice Committee and an expanded AI and data science education pathway. The Actuary of the Year award has recognised outstanding actuaries for more than three decades, honouring members who positively influence the profession and make a lasting contribution to industry, government or the community.

Mr Zheng is available for comment.

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About the Actuaries Institute and the Profession

As the peak professional body for actuaries in Australia, the Actuaries Institute represents the profession to government, business and the community. Our members work in a wide range of fields including insurance, superannuation and retirement incomes, enterprise risk management, data analytics and AI, climate change and sustainability, and government services.

Actuaries use data for good by harnessing the evidence to navigate into the future and make a positive impact. They think deeply about the issue at hand, whether it's advising on commercial strategy, influencing policy, or designing new products. Actuaries are adept at balancing interests of stakeholders, clients and communities. They're called upon to give insight on complex problems and they'll look at the full picture. Actuaries analyse the data and model scenarios to form robust and outcome-centred advice.

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