Actuaries Institute Podcast Title: Interview with Jennifer Lang, 2020 Actuary of the Year

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Guest: Jennifer Lang
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Introduction:

Ian: So, hello and welcome to this special edition of the Actuaries Institute podcast. My name's Ian Laughlin, and today I'm talking to Jennifer Lang. Jennifer of course last month was presented with the 2020 Actuary of the Year Award. And so, I would like to welcome Jennifer, and Jennifer, the hardiest of congratulations. You thoroughly deserve the award.

Jennifer: Thank you very much, Ian. I'm very humbled to be awarded the Actuary of the Year.

Ian: So now that you've had a chance to take it all in, how are you feeling about the award?

Jennifer: I'm pretty chuffed actually, it's a really, it's a recognition of my peers. I've always been proud to be an actuary, so it's really nice to have my actuarial skills recognised to be actuary of the year. It's definitely an honour. Yes, and doing the fundamentals really well. And in some ways, you can argue, we need to sort of reestablish the profession in the life insurance industry, improve its position.

Ian: Oh, that's really nice. Now, we'll come back to COVID-19 and sort of work our way up to it. But a number of the listeners I'm sure are familiar with your blog, the 'Actuarial Eye', and those that are familiar with it will know that you've got this wonderful ability to take technical numbers and topics and convey them in a really interesting and understandable way. And that's a great skill for any actuary to have, and it's critical of course, for many senior roles. So, talk to us about how your interest in that sort of thing evolved and developed.

Jennifer: Well, it's quite ironic actually, because when I decided to become an actuary, when I finished school, I thought that I would never have to write an essay again, and I actually hated writing. So, I thought actuarial differently involves numbers, it doesn't involve words, what a great thing to do, but obviously that's changed over the years. And the big thing that changed was in the early '90s, I went over to the UK to work with AMP, who I worked for at the time.

Jennifer: And I decided that it would be a good idea to volunteer as I had done in Australia for an actuarial committee somewhere. So, I've always felt that volunteering on an actuarial committee is a great way for anyone to develop their skills. You get to meet actuaries from all over the profession. You get to work with people from different levels and you get to learn from them.

Jennifer: So, when I went to the UK, I asked the chief actuary at Pearl and he said, “Oh yeah, I don't know about that. You have to be really important to be on a committee in the profession here”. So, I looked around and the only thing that was available that they were interested in taking a volunteer for was it editing the actuary magazine because it was a lot of work.

Jennifer: So as a young female colonial, I didn't really qualify for the big committees, but I qualified for the actuaries magazine. So that gave me an interest in writing and words and how to talk about actuarial concepts in a short space of time.

Ian: So that's a really great way to get into the communication. There's no doubt about that. And when you came back to Australia, you carried on that sort of thing, didn't you?

Jennifer: Well, so when I came back, I thought I'd quite enjoyed editing this magazine. So, I edited the magazine here in Australia as well for a little while. And then, because I found I did actually quite enjoy writing and I was working with people, I was ... who were helping me to get my writing better. One of my great mentors on writing was John Trowbridge, who, if you've ever had anything you've written edited by John Trowbridge, you fear his pen, but he's a really good editor. So, I started this blog because I thought it would be really good practice and I really enjoyed writing.

Ian: And for a time that was anonymous, wasn't it?

Jennifer: So, I worked for a company called Deloitte at the time, and they had very strict rules about what you could put out without lots of peer review. So, I thought that I would start it publicly, but in the end that wasn't allowed. So, I made it anonymous for a long time. And I just wrote about whatever I felt like, which was interesting, sometimes it was business, sometimes it was actuarial stuff, and sometimes it was just personal stuff about a bush walk I've been on or something like that.

Ian: So how do you go about getting the topics?

Jennifer: I guess, I just look for interesting statistics that I think I've got an angle on. So if I'm really short of something, I'll actually go and play around in the ABS website and see if there's interesting they've written ... recently written and lately, of course, COVID-19's been my major topic, but there always seems to be something different and interesting statistical to write about.

Ian: **So, COVID-19, I'm personally amazed at how prolific you are, how many COVID-19 blogs have you actually done?**

Jennifer: I've just done number 49. So, I did start daily, but it's not been daily for a while. It's probably more like weekly now. And it was partly for myself, I was reading way too much, and you can go down rabbit holes of reading quite scary things. And so, I found it really good for my own mental health to convert that reading into writing and to do something productive with it. So, I guess I'm now less obsessed by it, which is why I've only written once a week rather than once a day, but there's always something interesting and different angles to write about I find.

Ian: **And it's still evolving, of course.**

Jennifer: Of course, yes. As we get into second and third waves around the world and I started by writing all the epidemiological stuff, but there's a lot more to write about than that, there's the economic impact, there's the vaccines, there's all sorts of things that it's a fascinating topic.

Ian: **It is. We'll come back to your work on COVID-19 in a minute, but let's talk a bit about your career and that colonial female and how she evolved into what you are today. So, you've worked in different sorts of organisations. So, talk to us about that.**

Jennifer: So, I started my career at AMP as a scholarship holder. It was one of four women appointed that year, which was a bit controversial because it was a novel for AMP to have women scholarship holders. But we just happened all four of us to be the best at the time. And so, from AMP in Australia, I decided it would be nice to go and work for the UK ... in the UK, because it's a classic thing for Australians to do, go and work in the UK. So, AMP was generous enough to transfer me over there. So, I worked for Pearl for a little while over there, which was a fascinating time.

Ian: **And Pearl of course, at the time was owned by AMP, it was part of the AMP group.**

Jennifer: It had just been bought by AMP. So excellent transaction by AMP and a really interesting and different history because it was very much the insurance company for the working classes over there. And so, one of the things that I found fascinating is that they hadn't actually computerised their policy holders yet. It was still just cards in a special filing cabinet.

Ian: **Yes. So, one of the very rich parts of AMP history of course, and it continues to evolve in front of your eyes today. So, what happened after that? Where'd you go?**

Jennifer: So, coming back to Australia, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do next, but I ended up joining a consulting firm because I think one of the great things about being in consulting is you get a wide variety of problems and you get to work on a wide variety of companies. And so over my career, I've worked in both consulting and companies. In the end, I've found that I enjoy company work more because you're really working on the most important problems that affect a company.

Jennifer: But consulting does teach you a lot about how to define a problem, how to work out what matters most. So how to manage a project. It's the kind of thing that you don't get as much of in a company. So, for me, it's been a really good mix to be both a consultant and working in a company. So, I came back and worked for Trowbridge Consulting, which became Deloitte and then moved into CommInsure as kind of back into a company.

Ian: And presumably the experience you had as a consultant, seeing inside lots of different companies must serve you well, when you're working in just the one company?

Jennifer: Yeah. You get to see what good looks like. You get to see really good, who manages things well, and you also get to see different angles on the same kinds of problems. And so, when I was in companies, I've missed that, being able to see different ways of dealing with it, but it's horses for courses. It is much more fulfilling for me to work on that, what matters the most to the company.

Ian: And you've ended up in quite senior roles in those companies, including being CFO. Now, some actuaries of course stay in a purely technical role. But when you get into those senior roles, you have to have these broader skills and broader communication skills, both written and verbal, you need to talk to boards and that sort of thing. So, talk to us about how you evolved those skills.

Jennifer: Well, so I think my blog really helped. So one of the things I've found, even when it was anonymous, that the fact that you were writing for an audience and that you'd get comments on a good post and you'd get absolutely nothing on a bad post, made you start to realise how ... what good writing looked like. So I found that when I wrote something that really resonated, it made me think about what was it about that, that really resonated and reading other people's writing with the same angle and thinking about how I would write it made me a much better communicator.

Jennifer: So, I've always felt that everyone should work out how their own style works best. But for me, I found ironically, given the reason that became an actuary in the first place that writing was the way I communicated the best. So, developing that skill helped me also communicate more verbally to senior people around companies and to boards.

Ian: **And when you're talking to boards, do you have any suggestions, ideas, tips for people listening?**

Jennifer: So, in a board it's important to think about what is the most important issue and how to help that person explain it and understand it. It's explaining to help them understand, it's not explaining to make you look good. But the thing I find the most useful is that thinking about that person who is really smart, but just doesn't happen to know the little piece of information that I'm explaining to them right now.

Ian: **So, I always thought if you do a really good job talking to boards, then they actually want to engage with you. They want to ask you questions and so on, it makes it much easier than would otherwise be the case. So, Jennifer, you mentioned your early time at AMP and female actuaries were relatively unusual and of course that's changed dramatically in the time that you've been working. So, talk to us about the role of females in the profession now and how you've seen it evolve.**

Jennifer: Well, when I started, I think there were 50 female actuaries maybe, in Australia that is, and it was pretty unusual, and I was working with one of the first women to qualify at AMP. And now I think we probably get the right proportion of people finishing school ending up as actuaries. So, that's great. But we still find that we don't have as many female senior actuaries as we do at the junior level. And I don't think that's just about time. I think it's also about how we're supporting women to become senior.

Jennifer: So, we haven't got everywhere. But the great thing about the actuarial profession, I find as a woman has been that it's much more meritocratic than average because once you've managed to pass the exams, people look at you and say, well, if you pass the exams, you must be okay. So, there's that level of respect that you get from being an actuary, which you don't necessarily get in other professions at the junior level. So, I think that has helped, but we haven't got everywhere yet. We'll get there, I think.

Ian: **So, what was key in your transition from an actuary with some experience to those very senior roles that we were talking about earlier?**

Jennifer: That’s a really good question. How have I managed to transition from that technical to the more senior roles? And there's a whole lot of different things in there, but one of the things I reflect when I joined Trowbridge Consulting, I didn't realise this at the time, but I was joining a company where there was the same proportion of women at junior and senior levels. So, it wasn't a big thing to be a woman who was senior. People were just people. And I think in my time, since I've generally worked in places where I was one of a few women in a leadership team, whatever team I was in, it was only a few women and that has made it a lot simpler for me.

Jennifer: So, having a group of women around me who are also great, has been really helpful. But of course, I've had to do a really good job at all times to advance in different ways in my career. And that's true of anyone getting to senior levels. It's much easier to break through that, into that next level, if you're not the only person. So, I guess it's important if I was talking to junior women to think about who you have around you, but also to senior people.

Jennifer: It's not enough to say, “Oh, now I've got a woman in this leadership team”. You need to have diversity of all kinds. So not just being female, but you’re having a different ethnic or cultural background. It's really hard to be the only one. So, think about how to support those people.

Ian: So, what about being a CFO in particular? How did you prepare yourself for that?

Jennifer: Well, the interesting thing was I had been a chief actuary and the role that I had when I was a CFO did include the actuarial team. So, I had done part of the role, but not the less actuarial more accountant part of the role. And the thing I found, and it's actually quite consistent with that thinking about boards is, it's important to recognise the really important things that the accountants bring to the role as well. A lot of actuaries kind of think, well, it's not technical statistics, so it's easy, but it's not easy. It's just different.

Jennifer: And so, learning about the importance of controls and cash management and all of those kinds of things was really an important part of it for me. And I guess the other part that actuaries never quite like is having to make sure that you're managing expenses well and telling people that they can't spend money is never the popular thing to do. So, you always knew that it was not quite as popular as the actuary role.

Ian: And what observations do you have on the life insurance industry and the challenges it faces at the moment?

Jennifer: Well, that's a fairly big question, Ian. And you've probably got more answers than I do. I guess I find it really hard to look at how where we as the life insurance industry are at the moment. It feels like we haven't done ourself justice, but okay, take a step back and I think there is a massive need for life insurance. There's a massive need to insure people against disability, of giving people some level of insurance against the possibility that they might lose their income.

Jennifer: So, we do need to sort ourselves out so that we can be that really important part of the economy. We saw in the general insurance field, when HIH went under the people suddenly realized how important insurance is and if we're not careful, life insurance could become that impossible purchase. It's a really important part of the economy and I think we need to get ourselves back so that people can buy a good product at a reasonable price, but how do we get there? There's a lot of things that need to change and you probably know more about that than me, Ian.

Ian: **Yes. So, and your point about insurance sort of greasing the wheels of the economy is a really important one. And sometimes people look at insurance as a grudge purchase, I haven't got a claim, so it couldn't have been worthwhile, but of course that's not the intention. So, interesting challenge.**

Jennifer: Well, and it's one of those things that's very hard to communicate as well. Lots of my friends say that, well, I haven't claimed, so why have I got this policy but then I have other very good friends who lost their house in the bushfires five, six years ago in the Blue Mountains. And that makes you realise how important insurance is.

Ian: **That's right. So, let's move on then to your more recent work and in particular, your work on COVID-19. Talk to us about the role that you took on and why you took the role on.**

Jennifer: Well, so you've already talked about my blog. I was already starting to write blog posts and Elayne Grace realised that very early on very quickly, I think one of the great things about the actuarial profession is we're very good at recognizing these kinds of things when they happen that we did need to bring something together. So, she asked a few people who would be willing to put their hand up to lead a COVID-19 group. So, because I'm ... I've finished up as a CFO at the end of January, so I'm not as busy as I was, I had the time. So, I thought that something that I'm very interested in, something that I thought I could add value to. So that's why I put my hand up to lead it.

Ian: **And so, tell us what you've actually been doing?**

Jennifer: So, the first question was really, what should we be doing? What is the special thing that actuaries bring to any problem? And so, the first thing we did and actually you and I, Ian, were one of the early part of this was trying to think what is the special things that we should in particular be doing. So we thought about the fact that we're very good at modeling, we're very professional, we very much support those important industries that we support, so insurance, life, health, and general insurance also superannuation, how do we make sure that we're best supporting society in and the community in this crisis.

Jennifer: So, we made that list. And then we got together a kind of broad list of group of people from all of the many volunteers around the actuarial profession to say, well, what are the different things that we should be doing? And that group together worked at what they should ... what we should be doing, and everyone did it. There's a lot of comments about the things that as the leader I've done, but actually what I've done is empower a whole bunch of people to do a lot of great things.

Ian: **There's a really wide variety of work that's been done.**

Jennifer: And it has been really good for me to see all of the different diversity in the profession. Because I have probably spent most of my career in the insurance, life and general insurance parts, but health insurance, superannuation, investments, state of modeling, wider government responses, all of those aspects are part of this group. So, asking people what they think they should be doing and then helping them to achieve it, it's been really quite fulfilling.

Ian: **So that leads me to a question about how you see the profession evolving, because it has changed an awful lot during your career. And certainly, in mine, so tell us, how you see the future of the profession.**

Jennifer: It is an interesting question because there are data scientists now, back when I started probably the only place where you could look at and find people who might call themselves data scientists now were actuaries. And I think the thing that we as actuaries bring is that professionalism view. And we also bring that really good intersection between statistics and business. So, by our training, the professionalism and that intersection between statistics and business means that we're much instinctively better at translating the statistics into the business and vice versa.

Jennifer: We're not the only people who can do that anymore, but our training starts us off in a better place, I think. So, I think while we have great actuaries around doing that who are prepared to admit that they are actuaries, then I think that we'll be thriving. But I guess one of the things that I feel quite passionate about is we shouldn't abandon our roots. And so, life insurance is still a really important part of who actuaries are and we should be still supporting the life insurance, general insurance, health insurance because we started out as supporting life insurance.

Jennifer: So, that's one of the things that I'm ... I've been keen to get about my whole career, that we don't just go out and do the new and shiny things on the horizon, and we also keep supporting our roots.

Ian: **Yes, and doing the fundamentals really well. And so how do you see your own career evolving? You've got a lot of working life left ahead of you, what would you like to be doing?**

Jennifer: Well, I've moved a bit this year into the non-executive director space. So, I think it was one of those things that for me thinking about when I was ready for that was quite tricky because as I said before, I really like working on the problems that matter most to a company. But I feel as if I've got more to add around the boardroom table now by having been through some of the challenges of the life insurance and the general insurance industry for the last few years and seen what's gone right and what's gone wrong and that's where I feel I can add more value.

Jennifer: I had been hoping that I might do a bit more travel this year because my kids are a bit older, but that obviously hasn't happened.

Ian: Is there anything else that you would like to talk to the listeners about today? Any other messages you would like to give?

Jennifer: I guess I come back to what I started with that I found in my career working in the actuarial profession as part of the Institute of Actuaries, various committees on different things has been really beneficial for me, both in things I've learned, the ability to give back and the ability to work with actuaries across a wide variety of areas. So, I would encourage anyone listening to this to think about that because I think you do get more out of it than you give in many ways.

Jennifer: And a final plug in that context for the Actuarial Hackathon, which I worked on a bit this year. There was a committee that did it, the hard work, where we went out for not-for-profits, found interesting problems that actuaries could work on and a group, a whole bunch of volunteer actuaries worked on different problems for different not-for-profits and all of those people that I've talked to found it a really fulfilling exercise.

Ian: That's interesting. And what about the people that were helping, how did they find working with actuaries?

Jennifer: Well, I mean, that's actually the hardest. Part of the hard problem at the beginning is helping the not-for-profits understand what on earth an actuary does. So, that was probably the thing that I did more of this year. I went and found some new not-for-profits and tried to explain how we could add value. If you watch the hackathon, and we had it virtually this year and listened to the different people at the not-for-profit, they found it incredibly useful. Sometimes just the fact that there's some really good spreadsheet skills is useful, but some really interesting problems were solved.

Ian: All right. Well, look, I think that's all we've got the time for today. Thanks very much for your time.

Jennifer: And thank you, Ian. And thank you, we didn't mention early, in doing this that you are a key part of the Covid-19 working group. So, thank you for being a key part and thank you for the interview today.

Ian: No, you're very welcome. And for those of you listening, we hope you enjoyed the discussion. And if you'd like to listen to more podcasts, please visit the podcast section of Actuaries Digital. And

as always, there's an opportunity to write in with your questions and comments on the show, and everybody would love to hear from you. So, I'm Ian Laughlin, thanks very much for your time and goodbye. Thanks again, Jennifer. Bye.