

By Hank George

Rather than allow ourselves to stagnate at a time of great opportunity, we underwriters must become more involved.

Nothing to Lose but Chains

In the mid-19th century, two disgruntled German economists wrestled with provocative questions about the prevailing human condition. They ranted about chains of humankind's own making and the unrealized potential of Earth's most evolved species.

In a contemporary context, their insights ring true—that context being the current state of the life and health underwriting “profession” and self-imposed chains that tether its practitioners.

This underwriter takes no joy in putting profession in quotation marks. Nevertheless, those who relentlessly turn their collective backs on reality, huddling in a self-deluding netherworld of coulda and shoulda, bring this sorry judgment upon themselves.

Most home office underwriters are exhorted—arguably more now than at any time in the past—to keep their noses to the grindstone.

Myopic corporate-think contravenes common sense, taking its fiscal machete to such vulnerable low-hanging fruit as education, networking and professional development. As these expense-anathematic luxuries drift off into the mists of history, the prevalent response by chief underwriters is, typically, an impotent combination of hunkering down and hankering for the good old days—neither of which does any good.

Local and state underwriting associations, with laudable exceptions, wither, thank you sir, may we have even less?—as petty-cash-obsessed insurers renege on even minimalist support and should-be members balk at shelling out the dollar equivalent of a DVD and stay away in droves.

A global Web site with 1,500 members devoted to life and health underwriting now barely treads water. A priceless asset lies all-but-fallow for want of involvement of more than a hard-core few.

The proceedings of a national underwriting association squander scholarship, omitting rich content from concurrent sessions, when all of this could so readily be appended.

It is hard to accept that at one time in the recent past, we had a committee of peers who conducted highly prized surveys on topics of great relevance. Their output was coveted and revered, far and wide. This unique resource, it would seem, was simply allowed to die, by the very individuals accountably charged with its governance.

It is mind-boggling in its absurdity that some, entrusted with leadership within the hierarchy of underwriting associations, would inflict demoralizing degrees of pointlessly invasive micromanagement upon their all-volunteer army. At a time when visionary-caliber creativity serves us far better than nitpicking tactics honed in the corporate

world—nevertheless grossly inappropriate in a volunteer environment—it is the latter that insular leaders have willfully brought to bear.

And we let them get away with it, in blithe ambivalence to the inexorable consequences.

Who would disagree that actuaries are legitimate insurance professionals?

Actuaries clamor to contribute to their peer group. One

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is not held hostage to discharge accountabilities on behalf of their society; one competes for the privilege of service.

Actuaries elect, rather than impose, leaders. Has such radicalism ever flickered on the radar screen of underwriting? Actuaries don't tolerate continuing education; they mandate it.

At a time when sound underwriting has never meant more to insurers, continuing education is the exception, not the norm. A few insurers provide—internally or through external fee-for-service options—excellent programs, accepting this cost as money shrewdly directed to their bottom line. The majority, on the other hand, make do with patchworks of what scant offerings remain from reinsurers and service firms, coupled with sporadic, typically makeshift internal dribbles, which, in point of fact, are seldom more than token imitations of genuine learning.

Reflecting upon the depth and dimension of the art and science of underwriting, one can neither reconcile nor countenance the sorry state of our all-too-barren landscape, fashioned as it was by equal parts ambivalence, disordered priorities, poor leadership and frank unconsciousness.

I, for one, do not savor being consigned to an endangered species.

Isn't it about time to disentangle from our self-imposed chains?

Our star is rising; our ship, coming in.
We have a world to gain! **BR**

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