

FROM THE EDITORS

Does the Editor Matter?

As I am writing this column, it is mid-December, and the next *AMJ* editor has just been named. Sara Rynes will be taking over as editor of the *Journal* beginning July 1, 2004. This event will mark a transition for most of us at *AMJ*. In particular, our current editor, Tom Lee, and three associate editors, Dov Eden, Marshall Schminke, and myself, will see our tenures come to an end. Many of our reviewers will simultaneously conclude their terms. At the same time, Professor Rynes will end her term as an associate editor to climb up to the editor's roost. She will assemble a new team of associate editors and put together a new editorial review board. Some of the staff that helps manage the *Journal* will also change. Thus, the change in editorship has implications for many people.

Transitions raise questions. Whether a change involves new managers or new programs, those touched by the change naturally wonder what it means. As such, the switch from one editorial team to another raises the question, Does the editor matter? Certainly the editor matters a great deal to those directly working for *AMJ*. The editor directs and manages the workloads and the time of a number of active and busy people who play roles in the process of manuscript evaluation. But what about those who do not directly work for the *Journal* but who play central roles in manuscript evaluation, such as the reviewers? What about those with more limited, but important, connections with our publication, such as the authors? And what about the members of the field in general? Does the identity of the editor of *AMJ* matter to these latter groups?

It may surprise you to learn that, having spent two and a half years on the editorial team at *AMJ*, I think there are times when the editor does not matter that much at all. Of course, I also believe that there are times when the editor matters a great deal. The interesting issue is when each type of setting arises and what each situation means for authors.

As incredible as it may sound, the editor may not matter much in many ways, at least from the vantage point of an external observer. For example,

AMJ's editor is responsible for managing the manuscript review process. This system is quite complicated and is the lifeblood of this journal (and all other academic journals). Consider that the technology of how manuscripts are reviewed has changed from the old-fashioned method (paper) to the newfangled way (electronic files), a gigantic and extremely beneficial improvement. This change has produced many savings, mostly in manuscript-processing time. We can just as easily send a manuscript to a reviewer located in Taiwan or Singapore as we can to a colleague down the hall. The change in systems has been onerous in many respects, yet it probably is not related to the publication decisions made about manuscripts, as the transition does not mean that the criteria for evaluating manuscripts have changed. In addition, I think that the calculus according to which manuscripts are evaluated varies little from editor to editor, so I doubt if the manuscript review process itself has much effect on publication prospects.

There may also be little variation in how editors choose reviewers for individual submissions. Each incumbent editor will attempt to align the expertise of editorial board members as well as that of qualified and competent ad hoc reviewers with the content of submissions. Naturally, reviewers on our board sometimes complain that they do not know why they were selected to review particular manuscripts, a problem that arises simply from the large volume of submissions and the fact that some manuscripts do not fall neatly into particular research domains. Fortunately, we have dedicated, flexible, and hard-working reviewers, most of whom are willing to tackle those manuscripts that are more than a stretch.

I also suspect that there is little variation in how editors make decisions. It is important to note that editors do not simply count reviewer recommendations and then go from there (noting, for instance, that two reviewers advise rejection, and only one requests a revision, and therefore I will reject). Rather, the editors of *AMJ* read the submitted manuscripts and reviews, identify and evaluate the issues, and then make what they believe are the best decisions. It is also my suspicion that every editor focuses on one central issue when trying to

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decide about a submission: Can it make an interesting and important contribution?

As I reflect on these dimensions of the editor's responsibilities, I can see a logic emerging that suggests that the editor matters little to authors, and even matters little to reviewers. That conclusion is not meant to trivialize what editors do. I just expect that every editor will do his or her best to manage the manuscript process as efficiently and effectively as possible. Moreover, most editors likely want to publish the best work they can, work that extends, revises, and refines theoretical development and understanding, work that has managerial relevance.

Further, there may be situations in which authors think that the editor matters, but where they may actually not make such a difference after all. Consider editors' own publication backgrounds. These are important because they serve as professional identities, signals of these individuals' scholarly contributions, reputations, and presences in the field. Authors might fear that an editor could therefore have favorable predispositions toward particular areas, research topics, theories, and methods that may not include the authors' own interests.

My experience is that editors pay little attention to their own personal research streams and methodological proclivities, as they are more interested in attracting and publishing the best research possible. Tom Lee, for example, has been crystal clear in his proclamations that *AMJ* publishes research that reflects the interest groups and divisions of the Academy of Management and is inclusive of all members of the field. The only exclusionary boundary is defined in the *Journal's* purpose: to publish empirical research that tests knowledge-based claims and adds to theory and managerial knowledge. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that *AMJ* editors tend not to show favoritism to particular topics and methods (Beyer, Chanove, & Fox, 1995). Rather, editors strive to be open to all kinds of methods and ideas, and they seek to work with authors to develop and shape their contributions (Beyer, 1992).

So, as controversial as it may sound, I do not think that variation in editors' research interests matters much to authors. But I recognize that some are likely to disagree with my assertion, arguing that an editor's research interests are correlated to the subjects that are published during his or her watch. I am sensitive to these arguments but wonder if the direction of causality might be reversed. I suspect that some authors, perceiving an editor as favoring a particular type of research, decide whether or not to submit work to the editor's journal on the basis of what they think the editor might

like. From my knowledge of the last several editors, as well as my assessment of studies of the publication process, I do not see any evidence to support perceptions of editorial favoritism. I doubt that there is any relationship between an editor's interests and a manuscript's publication prospects at a journal like *AMJ* (see Beyer et al., 1995).

This issue has another implication. An editor can publish only the manuscripts that she or he receives and will actively solicit manuscripts while trying to shape the editorial review board to provide the type of feedback likely to improve those that are received (Beyer, 1992). On the flip side, scholars will only submit what they think has some acceptable chance of publication. It is therefore critical that the editor is seen and valued as someone who is open and receptive to all areas within the Academy. Here, the governance structure of *AMJ* plays a critical role when a new editor is chosen. Although the selection is not made via an elective or democratic process, and is a decision made by the AOM's Board of Governors, my suspicion is that editors are not chosen on the basis of their lifetime achievement, but on the basis of the Board's view that they have the experience and wherewithal to manage the journal to best advance the Academy's goals. I really believe that authors can perceive *AMJ* as representing the entire field of management and can trust that their work will receive a high-quality review, regardless of who the editor is. Editors are not experts on all subjects. But they know a good contribution when they see one.

Still, authors may believe that the editor matters in the context of their selection of reviewers, who, authors may reason, are the ultimate decision makers. Indeed, I have heard stories of authors who develop strategies when evaluating a journal, considering the various reviewers and hoping that they will get (or avoid) a certain reviewer who may (or may not) be sympathetic to their point of view. From my experience, such a process is a waste of time and effort. Having read literally hundreds of reviewers' letters now, I can honestly report that most reviewers offer their best evaluations and that they try hard to be precise, thorough, and careful in their assessments. The editor reviews a manuscript and the comments of the reviewer panel before arriving at his or her decision. For an author to strategize on who or who will not be a reviewer now makes little sense to me. I really believe that the vast majority of reviewers do the best they can, that they do not have agendas, and that they simply want to do good reviews and then go back to their own busy lives. Moreover, with three reviews for each manuscript, the editor gets a more complete picture of a manuscript than can be influenced by

the bias that any one reviewer might have. Further, an author does not know whether particular reviewers are even available to evaluate his or her submission.

So, does the editor matter? For authors, my comments so far would suggest that I do not really think so. But I think there is another side to this issue and that there are times when the editor does matter. Obviously, they matter in the publication decision process. Editors are similar to judges; they evaluate arguments and then decide which are the most impressive and compelling. And editors want to publish manuscripts—who really wants an empty issue? So, the editor does matter from the perspective that he or she wants and needs to publish the best work available.

The editor matters in another way too: she or he is an educator to an audience of peers. One of the missions of *AMJ* is to provide constructive and developmental feedback to all authors, regardless of the editorial decision outcome. In this way, the editor tries to help an author strengthen his or her work. This can be difficult, as it often means reaching beyond the observations and comments of the reviewers to assess what the editor as a colleague-scholar thinks can actually be done, given the constraints of the theoretical and methodological models in a particular submission. This is so very important. In addition, a high percentage of our submissions come from new faculty and/or doctoral students. This group stands to gain a great deal from an editor who takes the educational role seriously.

Recently, I ran across some files of my own manuscripts that had been submitted to *AMJ*. I noticed that many had been rejected by Michael Hitt during his editorship in the early 1990s (though I have had manuscripts rejected by most editors since!). Professor Hitt's letters, many of which were five pages or longer, were unbelievably rich and detailed, informative, and constructive. His comments had a profound impact on my learning and development. Professor Hitt's suggestions had many direct effects, including helping me to achieve subsequent publication success at other journals, to gain a broader appreciation for the publication process, and to learn how to offer my voice to the chorus in my research area. As an author, I learned so very much from such an editor. As an editor, I am humbled by these letters and by the service this man has provided to the field (and continues to offer, as he is on our editorial review board).

In addition, editors educate reviewers. For example, during part of my tenure on the *AMJ* review board, I had the pleasure of working directly with

Harry Barkema. Like Professor Hitt, Professor Barkema wrote extraordinarily comprehensive, supportive, and educational decision letters. These letters were not just broad and specific, but were also highly respectful. The authors and the reviewers stood to learn about the content and process of evaluation when presented with one of his letters. And, more than once, his letters served as a model for my own, once I became an editor.

Editors matter in other ways too. They develop strategies for their journals. They look for new ways to differentiate and strengthen the positions their journal's hold in the field. In addition, the editor must react to changes in the environment, those brought on by rival journals and those that are generic to the industry. For example, there is pressure brought on by technological changes. Do we change the review process by upgrading the technology? Another, similar environmental change has been the expansion of the Academy's membership by the increased presence of European, Asian, and African scholars. Recognizing, including, and supporting these scholars is an important strategic opportunity for *AMJ* (Barkema, 2001). In other ways, editors help to define the content and boundaries of their journals. For example, Art Brief (2003) recently provided a helpful reminder of the long-held mission of the *Academy of Management Review*, a gesture designed to help clarify, support, and stimulate submissions.

Moreover, editors are responsible for protecting the integrity of the review process and the manuscripts that are evaluated. For example, we have had incidents in which the manuscript review process was compromised, in that authors and/or reviewers learned each other's identities. In other instances, we have had authors submit work that had appeared in other journals. We have also encountered authors who have thought that we might be predisposed against their work. In these matters and others like them, the highest standards of integrity practiced by our editor and editorial team helped shape decision making. The editor clearly mattered then.

The editor can also imprint values on the *Journal* that may have long-lasting effects. For example, Jan Beyer sought to improve service to the authors, improve the quality of manuscripts through constructive feedback, and raise the general quality of management research by publishing exemplary articles (Mowday, 2001). This editor helped create an ethos that permeates *AMJ* today: fast turnaround, averaging about 60 days from initial submission; constructive and developmental commentary from reviewers and editors, regardless of the editorial submission; and providing suggestions that could

help scholars publish their work, even if not in *AMJ*. Beyer's goals, set in the 1980s, very much guide the editorial and reviewer board teams today. The editor does seem to matter.

Considered collectively, some elements of the foregoing reasoning suggest that I believe that the editor matters. Yet, as I also suggest, there are clear ways that the editor may not matter all that much. Combining these opposing ideas is possible. The reason authors get high-quality, timely feedback is that the editor and his or her team make it happen. Actually, one can argue that the editor matters to every part of the publication process (see Beyer and colleagues' 1995 article for a description of this process). When I consider the various arguments for and against the influence of the editor, I am most persuaded by those that say the editor does indeed matter.

A final note is that this column is appearing in the first issue of our final year as an editorial team. Looking ahead to the start of the last year of Tom Lee's tenure as editor, I want to commend him as having been an extremely fine editor and an outstanding leader. Tom has been open, kind, considerate, and extremely fair to all parties. He has sought advice, struggled mightily over some very complex issues, and taken responsibility for his decisions. He has worked tirelessly and has sacrificed in so many ways for *AMJ*. Indeed, counting his time as an associate editor, we can see that Tom has given much of the last six years of his life to the *Academy of Management Journal*. This is an amaz-

ing amount of service that Tom has invested in our community, and I have seen the degree to which the time and effort associated with managing *AMJ*'s multiple constituencies is both onerous and consuming. Tom has been an exemplary and highly committed editor. Thank you, Tom, for showing us how such an important job can be done with such excellence. The field owes you its highest possible regards. Tom has not only mattered, but made an important and lasting difference in the lives of many.

Donald D. Bergh
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Our New Editor

The *Academy of Management Journal* is very pleased to announce that **Professor Sara Rynes** will be its next editor. She will begin receiving new manuscripts on July 1, 2004, and will assume the editorship on January 1, 2005, with her editorial term ending on December 31, 2007. Currently, Sara serves as an associate editor at *AMJ* (2002–04). She is the department chair and the John F. Murray Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Iowa. Sara earned her Ph.D. in industrial relations in 1981, an MS in industrial relations in 1977, and a BA in social work in 1974, all from the University of Wisconsin.

The Academy of Management is very fortunate to have such a renowned scholar, dedicated scientist, and wonderful human being assume the stewardship of *AMJ*. With her appointment as its 17th editor, the journal is well positioned for an even brighter future. *AMJ* is in excellent hands.

Tom Lee
16th *AMJ* Editor

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