

FROM THE EDITORS

Tensions

Great bridges exist because engineers know how to harness tension. Parts weigh against each other in ways that create powerful structures far larger and stronger than anything that could be created without such stresses. This is also the case with the publishing process.

Our new editorial team began accepting submissions in July 2001. Since that time, I've become responsible for around 80 manuscripts, probably more papers than I had reviewed over the past five years. Over the past several months, I have studied manuscripts, evaluated reviews, participated in editorial panels, and communicated with authors, board members, and ad hoc reviewers. Such a blizzard of activity brings things into focus pretty quickly, including the tensions inherent in the peer review, editorial review, and publishing processes.

Here I would like to outline a few tensions that I've come to view as the most salient. They represent the balances—some delicate and some not so delicate—that we as an editorial team wrestle with each week, as we try to balance the interests of authors, reviewers, the *Journal*, and our discipline.

Length of Reviews

In a retrospective on *AMJ*'s first 40 years, Mowday noted that at the outset of the *Journal*'s publication, the average article was less than 9 pages long.¹ Even as recently as the mid 1980s, the average article was under 15 pages. However, by the mid 1990s, average article length had expanded to more than 25 pages. Much of this increase can be attributed to an increased emphasis on theory, more sophisticated research methodologies, and so on. But it should not be surprising that longer manuscripts result in longer reviews. As a result, one issue that has received increased attention recently is whether reviews have become too lengthy.

The answer, of course, depends on the sort of review. Does a review stretch to 6 pages because it itemizes each spelling and grammatical error in the manuscript? Or is it lengthy because it includes a detailed explanation of *why* the logic of Hypothesis

2 seems to contradict that of Hypothesis 1, and a specific idea about what statistical technique might replace a flawed one, and full references for suggested related readings? The best of the longer reviews (4–5 pages) I receive contain critiques of about the same length as those in the decent short reviews (2–3 pages). The difference tends to be in the quality of the developmental suggestions about what the author might do to remedy the concerns raised.

Reviewing versus Ghostwriting

At a recent reviewer workshop I attended, one reviewer lamented that although providing such detail was not terribly difficult for one who knows the research domain, "Why should I do the author's work for him?" A fair question, and one that a panelist answered simply, "Why not?" After all, a reviewer's expertise is exactly the value she brings to the process.

However, a difference exists between suggesting alternatives and performing the work for the author. Telling an author why CFA is more appropriate than EFA in a particular setting is not learning the skill or doing the analyses for her. Nor is telling an author that Smith wrote an insightful piece on his topic in 1992 the same as doing the reading or thinking for him. Thus, a fine line exists between providing guidance (with respect to framing, theoretical focus, hypothesis development, and so forth) and stepping beyond that role, to what some might call ghostwriting. But developmental reviews are, in the main, teaching reviews. And the long-term welfare of our scientific process (and, in turn, the review process) depends as much on teaching as it does on discovery.

Length of Editors' Letters

A few years ago, I failed in an attempt to secure a grant from a national funding agency. The letter informing me of the decision read simply, "The committee does not explain its decision, nor does it entertain appeals." Elegant and effective, I suppose. But from my perspective, not terribly satisfying. At one recent editors' panel, an audience participant lamented the 10-page tome he had received from an

¹R.T. Mowday (1997), "Celebrating 40 years of the *Academy of Management Journal*," *Academy of Management Journal*, 40: 1400–1413.

editor. "I can read the damn reviews!" he stated. "I don't need the editor to repeat everything again!" True enough. Authors don't need an editor to repeat review content. But as most authors know, reviewers are often, inconveniently enough, not of one mind. They view the world in different ways, raise different issues, and sometimes provide contradictory advice. Thus, the decision letter from an editor must perform two critical tasks. First, it must prioritize the issues raised across the reviews. Second, it must resolve conflicts between the reviewers and offer the author advice about how to proceed in light of them.

However, an editor also plays a reviewing role as well. Typically, three solid reviews provide a fairly fine-grained analysis of a manuscript's strengths and weaknesses. But from time to time even quality reviewers miss something critical, and an editor's job includes bringing such an issue to the table. These additions make revisions potentially more difficult for authors, but not nearly as difficult as having them discovered by reviewers later on in the process! Good editorial letters do all of these things and, irrespective of the decision rendered, should help the author improve both his current manuscript and future efforts.

Number of Reviewers

Not too long ago, the *Academy of Management Review* utilized five reviewers per manuscript. The *Journal of Applied Psychology* uses two. At *AMJ* we typically use three. Clearly, good journals differ as to the right number of reviewers, and this debate reflects several tensions. Perhaps the most significant of these issues is this: What constitutes a fair hearing among one's peers? *AMJ* is an empirical journal, and empiricists tend to value more data points over fewer. Further, additional reviews provide room for more perspectives, a greater chance that some reviewer may identify a "rich bit" in the work, some small gold nugget with the potential to make a significant contribution to the field. All of those are good things.

However, additional data points come with costs, and some of those are significant. A previous *AMJ* editor often commented that the most valuable resource for the *Journal* (and thus, for its authors) was quality reviewers. *AMJ* handles over 500 manuscripts a year, which translates into a burden on our editorial board and ad hoc reviewer pool of over 1,500 reviews per year. Five reviews per manuscript would increase that to over 2,500 reviews per year, or 7,500 reviews over the three-year tenure of an editorial team! Good reviewers—and we think we have the best—are in strong demand and have

scarce resources to contribute to their duties. There is a significant potential cost in not recognizing and respecting that scarcity.

The burden is also borne by authors, who must wait for and respond to multiple reviews. Late reviews can slow down a manuscript's turnaround time considerably, and the chance of tardy reviews grows with each additional reviewer. Further, a common observation at editorial Q&A sessions is that from time to time, reviewers have a pesky tendency to disagree with each other. Good editors can help, but potential disagreements grow exponentially with the number of reviewers.

As noted above, *AMJ* typically uses three reviewers. When we are unsuccessful in obtaining a third review, an editor may make a decision on a manuscript with only two reviews, especially if they are consistent with each other, or if the area is one in which the editor is especially well versed, or both. We believe this practice strikes a sound balance between providing a fair hearing for an author's ideas, placing a reasonable load on our reviewing resources, enabling timely processing of manuscripts, and ensuring a manageable burden for authors responding to the reviews.

Who Are the Customers of Reviews?

Other tensions involve reviewers more than authors but are still important. One of the best lessons I learned as a reviewer was that each of my reviews had two customers. One, of course, was the author, who wanted to improve the current paper, to get it published, and to improve her overall research area. Those goals were pretty self-evident, and it was fairly straightforward to craft a review that might help her accomplish all three.

However, the other customer was the editor, who wanted to make a sound publishing decision. At *AMJ*, reviews are advisory, not binding; reviews do not constitute "votes" that translate into acceptances or rejections. *AMJ* editors make our publishing decisions, but they depend heavily on reviewers to provide sound advice. That decision structure creates a potential tension that is not always so obvious.

It's been said that reviewers look for reasons to reject papers, while editors look for reasons to accept them, and there may be something to that. For a reviewer, it's pretty easy to spot flaws in others' work. But it's more difficult to advise the editor on whether you believe those flaws to be fatal and, maybe more importantly, on whether the work is interesting and important to its niche, in which the editor is probably not an expert. Thus, the reviewer serves two customers simultaneously. He wants to

provide a positive, developmental review that will allow the author to improve both the current manuscript and any continuing research in the area. But he also wants to provide the editor with a candid evaluation of the manuscript's chances for making a significant contribution to the research area, and of its chances for a successful revision.

This tension is at times manifested in incongruity between the tone of a review (which we always hope is positive) and its outcome (which often is not). Most who review for this journal or others know how important it is to provide editors with a separate, candid, evaluation of a manuscript's potential. When coupled with a positive and developmental (but realistic) review, such an effort allows both customers to receive the greatest value from the reviewer's labors.

The Expertise of Reviewers

Reviewer expertise reflects two distinct tensions. The first concerns experience. At many golf courses in Europe, golfers need to show a license before being admitted. No such licensing exists for the more critical activity of reviewing. The question, then, is how to attract, develop, and keep the most talented and committed reviewers. Some journals have explicit or implicit requirements that reviewers will have published a certain number of articles in a certain set of journals. *AMJ* has no such rule. If you feel competent in a particular research area, you may contact our office and be considered as an ad hoc reviewer in that area. Because each publication decision involves three reviewers (two of whom are typically editorial board members) and an editor, an inexperienced reviewer cannot unduly sway a decision. Many of our best reviews come from younger scholars and, maybe more importantly, I hear many of these newer reviewers comment on the "learning moment" that presents itself when they view the decision letter and other reviewers' impressions of the manuscript they have recently reviewed. Of course, every author wants the most experienced reviewers assigned to her manuscript. But as a journal and as a profession, we need to take responsibility for grooming our own talent, and allowing some diversity of experience in the reviewer pool is a great way to ensure that it is a deep one well into the future.

A second tension with respect to reviewing concerns the topical expertise of reviewers. All authors want their work to be read by those likely to understand it and its importance, and often that means those who are expert in the same research area. However, all authors also value the opportunity to bring new ideas to a particular research

domain. Accurate or not, a perception sometimes exists that the "cagey veterans" in a research niche might not be as open to new ideas as those offering those new ideas might prefer. Thus, allowing fresh eyes—those from other research domains—to view manuscripts may enhance the review process. The editorial team (which, by virtue of its small size, cannot be expert in all of the research domains that appeal to *AMJ* authors) often plays this role. But an author should not be surprised or dismayed if one reviewer does not appear to be a specialist in his area of study. Likely as not, this reviewer's perspective on the work will provide interesting new perspectives, as well as an opportunity for the author to make his case to a scholar with no interest, intentional or not, in maintaining the status quo in the research domain.

Revisions versus Rejections

Finally, the most painful moment for an editorial team member is the final accept-or-reject decision. More accurately, the decision usually comes down to revise or reject, and there is no doubt that it can be a very difficult one. We understand that as stewards of the *Journal*, we make decisions that can change people's lives. An *AMJ* publication can help validate a scholar's position in the field. It can make the difference at tenure and promotion time. It can help in a job search. We know these things because we live them, too. However, with an overall acceptance rate of only around 10 percent, we recognize that most of the work that we see—in spite of the fact that it represents months and even years of scholarly effort—will not, in the end, appear in the *Journal*. Thus, we also know that we break people's hearts.

As a result, the revise-or-reject decision becomes extremely critical. Editors are in the business of publishing, not rejecting, manuscripts. Our team (and every editor I know) goes to great lengths to try to identify manuscripts that contain a "rich bit." The tension emerges in determining how long a long shot will receive an invitation to revise. Some manuscripts arrive in virtually final form, with well-developed theory, sound methodology, good data, and appropriate analyses. Reviewers and editors alike find it very easy to assess the contribution of such a paper. But at other times, concerns about some or all of those factors make that assessment impossible. In determining whether to invite a revision, an editor asks two questions. First, suppose that all of the problems are successfully addressed. Would the paper then make a significant contribution? Second, are all of the important problems fixable? If the answer to both of those ques-

tions is yes, we are likely to invite a revision, albeit possibly a high-risk one. We recognize that searching hard for "rich bits" and inviting high-risk revisions places a greater burden on our reviewers and, more importantly, on our authors, who may work for months on an extensive, but eventually unsuccessful, revision. However, *AMJ* is committed to being the outlet of choice for empirical management researchers, and we believe that finding and developing the best manuscripts—some of which are only diamonds in the rough at the time of initial submission—warrant this additional effort.

Conclusion

In his classic study of America's young democracy, de Toqueville predicted that our experiment in governance of, by, and for the people would, by necessity, produce a society that would seem somewhat coarse to the European gentry. So, too, with our peer review system of publishing. It is truly a system of, by, and for its people and, like de Toqueville's America, it can seem a bit unpolished or

even coarse at times. But like de Toqueville, I see this as a good thing; tension works.

Publishing is exciting, intriguing, and difficult. It balances the interests and opinions of authors, reviewers, editors, and our field, in meaningful—and sometimes slightly mysterious—ways. Like a bridge, it relies on inherent tensions for its strength. Advances in engineering continue to provide more effective ways to harness tension, to do more with less. The Brooklyn, Golden Gate, and Sydney Harbor Bridges no longer represent cutting-edge engineering, but that doesn't diminish our appreciation for their beauty and functionality. No doubt our publishing process will also continue to improve its "engineering" practices, allowing us to do more, and to do better, with limited resources. As that happens, and it surely will, let's take the time to appreciate our current structure. Its tensions are both beautiful and functional. And, just like a great bridge, sometimes the publishing structure is just a little scary to the people who work on and around it.

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