

Chapter-33

How to set up Peer Review System: find and retain good reviewers?

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Peer Reviewers along with Editors who are known as Gate Keepers play an important role in improving the quality of manuscripts accepted for publication. Hence, it is essential for the Editors to set up a Peer Review System which utilizes the services of chosen reviewers efficiently. The system should clearly define the objective, ensure careful selection of the reviewers and some sort of reward system should be in place to retain the good reviewers. The system must be reviewed periodically to meet the journal needs. Updating reviewer's database and ensuring regular feedback is some of the essential parts of a good peer review system. Peer review ensures that only authentic and correct information is passed on to the readers.

Editors must be clear in their mind as to what do they require from their reviewers? It is not possible for an Editor to make all the decisions single handedly and they will require the experts' advice. Despite lot of adverse comments about the shortcomings of the Peer Review system, till today no alternate system could be developed to improve the quality of manuscripts before publication, hence the editors continue to use it. Small journals need only a few reviewers, hence it may not be difficult for them to have a Reviewers Database but as the number of submissions grow, it becomes extremely difficult to manage them and it requires an efficient peer review system in place. Revolution in information technology has now offered different Systems for handling manuscripts which also offer

automatic peer review like Scholar One, Manuscript Manager and Editorial Manager. However, one must be familiar with the principles and etiquette. Journals with large number of submissions do use some automation but these systems need to be sensitively implemented. Hence, the importance of an option of personalized communications can never be over emphasized. Some journals ask more than three or four reviewers at the same time to review the manuscripts and as soon as they get the required number of reviews, the system automatically contacts the reviewers who have not yet returned the manuscripts with a message of thanks and stating that their review was no more needed. This looks a bit rude, hence it is suggested that the message in automated e mail should state that “if you have already started reviewing the manuscript, please communicate your comments by such and such date”. A much better option will be not to use the automation system and send personalized emails to the reviewers but it is time consuming and might result in delays.

Before commissioning any manuscript tracking system, the editors must be clear in their mind about the whole process. Large publishers maintain a separate system for tracking the accepted manuscripts from production to publication. Editors have to decide as to what proportion of the manuscripts they receive need to be sent out for external review. Some general journals managed by full time editors may not send all the manuscripts for external review, reviewing some of these papers themselves but part time editors tend to send most of the manuscripts for external review. Sometime manuscript accepted for further processing during initial internal review may be desk rejected by the editor when he or she decides not to send them for external review.

It must be decided as to what information about each reviewer is essential which can be useful. The basic minimum information which an editor must have about its reviewers must contain name, address, position, phone, fax and cell phone number. Their interest in a particular specialty, e-mail, details

about qualification and how many manuscripts they will be interested in reviewing. Additional information should contain their past track record, how much time they take to review, do they acknowledge receipt of the manuscript immediately and do they need reminders. How helpful their comments are for you as an Editor and for the authors?¹ Some journals first send an e mail with title or abstract to the potential reviewers asking them if they will be interested to review that particular manuscript while others send the manuscripts with a request to inform the editor if they think, it is beyond their area of expertise or interest immediately so that it can be sent to some other reviewer. It saves lot of time and works well in many cases. Reviewing the reviewers comments before they are passed on to the authors is important to ensure that no derogatory language, harsh comments are used, that is why any automation system has its inherent drawbacks and disadvantages and it should be avoided. Efforts should be made to get best out of the selected reviewers.

These days most of the authors submit their manuscripts electronically direct on the journal website which is considered the best and is also the way forward. Manuscripts are also increasingly being edited electronically. Some journals have also experimented using open peer review system on the web. Remember Reviewers are a valuable resource and any system the editors might select to use must give the reviewers due respect so that they feel a part of the whole system.

How to Find Good Reviewers?

To begin with one should ask the people you know personally. Then they can be asked to nominate other reviewers they know and will be interested in reviewing the manuscripts. One can also use different databases, authors from different journals, directory of members by various professional specialty organizations; identify good reviewers from the conferences. The authors can also be requested to suggest some reviewers. Look at the track record of the reviewers. It is important to have different geographical locations. Those reviewers who have close

relationship with rival journals should be excluded. Similarly those reviewers who are known to be unreliable, “Nasty”, those not enjoying good reputation should also be excluded. Personal contacts, e mail, letters can be used to solicit the potential reviewers.

Make sure that your reviewer’s database has national reviewers, regional and international reviewers. The type of reviewers will depend on geographical scope of the journals, publishers i.e. institution and organization, aim and scope of the journal, type of the journal i.e. general journal or specialty journal. The selected reviewers must have minimum professional qualifications and academic aptitude. Young faculty members generally do a good job and they are more efficient. Similarly those affiliated with academic institutions are known to be better reviewers.

Categorization of Reviewers: The reviewers can be categorized as Excellent Reviewers, Good Reviewers and not so good reviewers. Excellent reviewers will also do copy editing, improve English language and Grammar, correct references apart from looking at the scientific contents of the manuscript. Not so good reviewers will leave copy editing and improvement of English, correction of references to the editors and not so good reviewers will just look at the scientific contents and that too casually. Looking at the quality of review one can decide whether to continue sending manuscripts to these reviewers in future.

Comments from the Reviewers must always be edited. Unreliable, harsh comments should be eliminated. Editors must ensure that the reviewer’s comments are constructive and help authors to improve their manuscripts. It is also important that the Editors closely monitor their deputies and support staff through some sort of an oversight.

How to Retain Good Reviewers?

Finding a good reviewer and retain them is extremely important. It is a challenge for the Editors. In order to retain good reviewers the following steps may be helpful:

1. Recognize their services.
2. Refrain from over burdening good reviewers.
3. Make sure that the topic is of interest to them.
4. Have some CME Credits. Now some websites offer Reviewers Credit once the journals get themselves registered on their website. The reviewers can then claim Credits and it is extremely useful and helpful.²
5. Look at different ways of rewarding the reviewers
6. Send them some books, reading material, gifts on special occasions.
7. Send them appreciation certificates.
8. Publish their name in the journal at the end of the Year acknowledging their contributions.
9. Provide complimentary copies of the journal.
10. Provide them some concession, discounts in publication charges.
11. Provide them the facility of fast track processing of their manuscripts.
12. Training the reviewers through participation in Workshops.
13. Get together, meetings from time to time.
14. Give them due respect and recognition.
15. Appoint good reviewers to the Editorial Board or International Advisors.
16. Send them courteous request letters.
17. Thanks e mail post review.
18. Award distinguished Reviewers.

Financial Rewards: Some journals who can afford also offer some honorarium for reviewing a manuscript but financial rewards do not work all the time. I remember while conducting a training course for Editors at a medical university, one of the participants remarked that since the reviewers spend lot of time in reviewing the manuscripts, the journals must give them some financial incentives which may be even peanuts. However, before I could respond, another participant remarked that *“Peanuts will be picked up by Monkeys and not Lions”*. Respect and recognition works much better than financial rewards.

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FURTHER READINGS

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