

# MIS Quarterly

## The AE Role<sup>1</sup> at MISQ

### MISQ Roles

There are four critical roles in the reviewing of manuscripts at MISQ in addition to the role of the Minnesota staff. These are (1) the authorial role, (2) the reviewer role, (3) the AE role, and (4) the SE role. For each of these, a descriptive document has been prepared and is available for perusal by the entire IS community at <http://www.misq.org>. Each document has been written from the perspective of those enacting a given role.

### Overview of AE Role

The AE works in close cooperation with the SE, who is the final decision-maker in reviewing submissions for *MISQ*. Your role is to confer closely with the SE, manage the review process, and interact with reviewers, if, indeed, interaction is called for. The AE and the SE form a partnership, with the success of the partnership being determined not by the ability to filter out problem papers, but to figure out how to get good papers successfully through the review process at *MISQ*.<sup>2</sup>

### Personal Rewards of Serving as AE

The greatest reward an AE is likely to experience is the deep satisfaction of knowing you are reviewing novel and exciting research and bringing this work to the eyes of the community. In almost all cases, these papers would not be nearly as effective were it not for your assistance as AE in developing and sculpting the intellectual content.

When a paper you have edited appears in pre-print or print, you will experience contentment, even pleasure that your hard work has helped a colleague or group of colleagues and your assistance has elevated this work to the point where it can receive the attention it is due. In many cases, you will also be able to enjoy the progression of these ideas as they are utilized and cited by other researchers and the ideas grow and become refined over time.

Another tangible benefit of serving as AE is that you are at the intellectual heart of the discipline. Not only will you see early versions of exhilarating work that will, no doubt, influence your own thinking, but you will also be part of an editorial board that recognizes such work through “Best Paper” awards and other acknowledgments.

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<sup>1</sup>Terms-of-art in this document include: AE (Associate Editor); SE (Senior Editor); EIC (Editor-in-Chief); review team (the entire group of evaluators, including SE, AE, and reviewers); Minnesota staff (The Regents of the University of Minnesota own *MIS Quarterly* and, thus, the staff who assist the EIC in running the journal are employees of the University of Minnesota); editorial board (generically, the sum total of EIC, SEs, and AEs; more specific terms would be the SE Editorial Board, etc.).

<sup>2</sup>Manuscripts at *MIS Quarterly* are processed online at <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/misq>. All editorial board members need to register in order to receive and process manuscripts. Please direct *all* communications through this online system so that we have a complete audit trail of the reviewing process. **This is extremely important.**

Your influence in reviewing stimulating work for publication also extends to informing the structural decisions that lead to new venues for research. One of the critical roles of AEs is in advising the EIC on new editorial board appointments at the AE level. This allows you to exert your influence on who will be the next set of key AE evaluators for the journal.

## Procedure for Handling Papers

How should you go about handling papers that you have agreed to review? The following steps outline what should be happening at each stage of the process.

1. **For each round of reviewing, make a recommendation about the manuscript to the SE.** Each round, you, as AE, will be asked to make a recommendation on the disposition of the manuscript. The range of these decisions is (1) reject, (2) reject but invite new submission, (3) major revisions, (4) minor revisions, (5) accept conditionally (very minor revisions), and (6) accept.

How do you make this key recommendation? This task entails carefully reading the manuscript rather than making a recommendation based only on a cursory reading. We rely very much on AEs exercising their knowledge, experience, and wisdom in reaching their own, independent decisions.

Why would you make a recommendation of major revisions, minor revisions, accept conditionally, or accept? When papers are first received at *MISQ*, it may be that they are attacking fascinating problems and have innovative approaches to these problems. In such a situation, you and the rest of the review team may see promise in the work, but the paper needs either a considerable amount of revising (major revisions) or a limited amount (minor revisions) in order for the paper to be developed into a publishable paper. Rarely, very rarely, will papers have achieved the plateau of conditional acceptance or acceptance when they are first received. For even the best papers, you and the rest of the review team almost always have suggestions that can improve the paper.

Recommendations of accept conditionally and accept typically occur after one or more rounds of review. When the authors have dealt with all the substantive issues and the review team is in clean-up and polishing mode, these are the appropriate recommendations.

Why would you either reject a paper outright or reject/invite new submission? The answer is simple enough. In your judgment, you view the paper as not making a significant enough contribution and unlikely to do so even with revision, you will recommend rejection. Of course, your determination is contingent on the *category* of the paper. Regular research articles invoke high standards for making new theoretical advances with rigorous support, but research notes have a somewhat lesser requirement because they are shorter. Research essays enlist a different set of standards in that these are most often methodological. Finally, issues and opinions do not generally require sizable empirical evidence and rely instead on an interesting logical development of ideas. See the *MISQ* website for further descriptions of the categories of papers that we publish.

Reject, but invite new submission is a relatively new decision option at *MISQ*. What it means, in effect, is that you see some promise in the paper; however, the paper either lacks sufficient information for you to make an informed judgment or is so badly written that passing it to the review team would only ensure its not being well received, perhaps even its final rejection. If the authors choose to resubmit, it will be assigned a new log number and they can express their opinion as to whether to return to the same review team or recommend a different review team. So if you feel that the paper shows some promise, you can recommend reject, but invite new submission, which means that, if the SE agrees, the authors will engage in a large scale, risky revision, and you may see the paper again later.

2. **Prepare your screening report or recommend that the paper is ready for review.** Upon reading the manuscript, if you determine that the paper should not continue any further in the review process (i.e., your recommendation is either outright rejection or reject, but invite new submission), then you as AE write a screening report that explains your reasons for recommending rejection (called a desk reject), and offering constructive suggestions about how the authors can pursue their research. Before sending your recommendation to the SE, please share your thoughts about the paper informally, via email. Informal communications are helpful in, if at all possible, reaching a consensus of editorial opinion. While it is not necessary that you and the SE hold exactly the same views with respect to the manuscript, a consensus on the vital statistics of the paper is the best scenario from the standpoint of the authors and ultimately best for finding papers worthy of publication.

Upon reading the manuscript, if you determine that the paper needs changes before it should be sent to reviewers, then you again write a screening report detailing these changes. This will be sent to the SE. It would be helpful if you forewarn the SE about the likely essence of your report and discuss this with her/him before actually sending in your AE screening report.

Incidentally, screening can go several rounds in its own right before a paper is sent out for review or rejected. All this means is that the reviewers have not been sent a paper and that the editors are advising the authors.

The third option is a recommendation that the paper is ready for review. In this case, you would feel that, while not perfect, the paper is clear and strong enough to make a decent impression on the reviewers. And that you do not see anything in the paper that cannot be “fixed.”

Suppose you determine that a manuscript shows enough promise that you recommend that it continue in the reviewing process and suppose the SE agrees with this assessment. At this point, the paper’s chances for eventual acceptance have gone up quite a bit. The probability is not 1.0, but the odds are very high.

Our widespread practice of this framing will preempt endless cycles of revisions of papers that are finally rejected on the  $n^{\text{th}}$  cycle. *MISQ* has a reasonably good record in *not* rejecting papers after multiple revisions, and we would like to continue to shine in this category.

3. **Choose reviewers and sign them up for the paper.** Once you have provided feedback and the SE determines that the paper is ready for to be sent out for review, work with the SE to identify the rest of the review team. The authors may have provided names of potential reviewers, and if they have not, you can ask them to do so via email. Otherwise, the usual sources of reviewers are your and the AE’s own knowledge, the citations in the paper, and the AISWorld Faculty Directory (<http://www.isfacdir.org/>), which has a search by research area capability.
4. **Signal the reviewers your views about the paper.** You will want to clearly communicate your impressions and initial assessment of the paper to the reviewers. It is appropriate, for example, to indicate why you see promise in the paper (even using strong language that you “like” the paper), but want the reviewers to make independent judgments. If s/he sees fatal flaws, then please tell them that this needs to be shared with you. If the paper has lesser flaws (and what paper does not?), then the real question is what it will take to fix them.<sup>3</sup> This is where the reviewers can serve a vital role.

Please note that this represents a major change in how reviewing has occurred in the past at *MISQ*. Here is the line of reasoning. Traditionally, the reviewing process in IS journals, including *MISQ*, has been a bureaucratic process

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<sup>3</sup>Possible language to convey this to the reviewers is as follows: “If you are willing to serve as reviewer on this paper, I need your own independent judgment about the chances of the paper succeeding in the review process. I have briefly outlined above why I see promise in the paper and believe that it could offer a solid research contribution. Of course, if there are problems that are fixable, then indicate these briefly to me. If you feel that the paper has aspects to it that are not fixable, then I need to know that as well.”

that involves strictly the passing of written reports from the reviewers to the AE, followed by a written report from the AE to the SE. Finally, the SE sends a written report to the authors.

This traditional process is slow, and it often results in conflicting views and awkward moments, especially when the written reports disagree on whether the paper shows sufficient promise. By strongly signaling your initial views on the paper, the reviewers should be inclined to focus on the manuscript's strengths rather than focusing on its weaknesses. This approach does not rule out the possibility that the reviewers will find fatal flaws, however.

In this regard, if the paper is sent out to reviewers, you should be *informed* by them without allowing their views to *determine* your decision. In colloquial terms, this is not a democracy. It is a hierarchy and the SE is delegating authority to you to make an independent recommendation in the handling and disposition of the manuscript.

As an indicator of the responsibility embedded in your role, we have had cases at *MISQ* where an AE has recommended that a paper continue in the review process in spite of negative responses by all three reviewers. The bottom line is that your experience as to what constitutes a contribution to IS research is what you should bring to bear. Your AE appointment is a recognition that you can adopt a high level, holistic view that may not be in the purview of the reviewers.

5. **Prepare your AE report.** Please note that the AE is responsible for bundling all reviewer reports together along with her/his own report and submitting this to her/his SE. This is not the job of the SE. This procedure differs from that of other top journals to ensure that there is no uncivil language, ungrammatical sentences, or untoward/unsupportable points of view that the reviewers have taken that would be deleterious and not at all helpful to the authors. In effect, this procedure should filter out mistakes or errors of fact on the part of the review team and help to present a united (but reasonable) front to the authors. Please feel free to correspond openly with the reviewers and ask for a revised report if that is appropriate. Mind you, this would not be a request for reviewers to change their views. It is simply an attempt to impose a high quality review standard onto the review team reports. Simple grammatical errors in review team reports, for example, hardly encourage authors to assume that the evaluators have spent sufficient time contemplating the virtues of the manuscript.

## Privacy

Please understand that *MISQ* is giving you access to submissions and all other review documents solely for the purpose of evaluation. You may not at any time share them with parties who are not reviewing the paper.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript under review is not citable, and its contents remain the intellectual property of the authors until such time that it would be accepted for publication and the authors sign a copyright transfer to *MISQ*.

Clearly, the paper may have influenced your general thinking about a particular phenomenon and that is all to the good. But unique intellectual innovations in submissions are sacrosanct and may not be referenced, adapted, or reused without express permission from the authors. Unfortunately, since your handling of submissions means that you have a vested interest, it is a conflict of interest for you to ask the authors for this permission. Thus, until a paper is accepted for publication, it may not be cited.

As an AE, you also have access to the identities of authors, to their recommendations for using (and sometimes against using) certain editors and reviewers, and to other privacy information. All of this is to be treated as confidential and not disclosed to any parties who do not already have access to it.

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<sup>4</sup>Exceptions to this rule would be cases of possible plagiarism or ethics violations where it is necessary to share documents with evaluators for purposes other than evaluating the quality of the work.

## Ethics

Accepting the role of AE also indicates your acceptance of conditions in relation to suspected or alleged instances of unethical behavior relating to *MISQ* that you identify or that are brought to your attention. Specifically, the conditions are that (1) you will keep the incident confidential unless otherwise advised by the Editor-in-Chief, (2) you will report the incident to the Editor-in-Chief as soon as possible, and (3) you will take no other actions yourself unless otherwise advised by the Editor-in-Chief.

## AE Assignments and Time Lines

Given the current number of submissions to *MISQ*, you can, on average, expect to make disposition decisions on numerous manuscripts per year. In short, the workload is high, as at times the incoming flow of manuscripts is heavy. Unfortunately, manuscripts tend to come in clusters, and at times you may be asked to review several manuscripts concurrently (all at various stages in the review process). In the normal course of events, kindly agree to take on a manuscript when asked to do so by an SE or the manuscript coordinator.

Please appreciate the fact that there will not always be a one-to-one match between the topic of the paper and your expertise, narrowly defined. If the only way we could review papers would be if there were such a match, we would need nearly as many AEs as there are authors. In short, you will likely have to stretch at times to be able to provide reasonable feedback to the SE and the authors, but that is business-as-usual. SEs do their best to request AEs that are a good fit to the paper, either methodologically or topically. However occasionally you might be asked to review a paper that you feel is outside your comfort zone. Hopefully such cases are rare, but nonetheless, you should be able to draw upon your specific and general knowledge of the research in IS to provide constructive feedback.

If you are already handling a reasonable set of papers and feel that you cannot take on more, indicate this to the EIC and the *MISQ* office. We will all try to be understanding, but the bottom line is that papers have to be reviewed, and the AEs are on the front line for the reviewing of papers. The simple truth is that the work has to be done by someone, and you, along with other AEs, have agreed to serve.

A major goal is to improve even further our reputation for providing timely reviews. In this regard, upon receiving a manuscript, please strive to fulfill the following time lines:

Initial screening by SE	3 to 4 days
Screening by AE and obtaining reviewers	7 to 10 days
Reviewers	21 to 28 days
Preparation of AE report	4 to 7 days
Preparation of SE report	4 to 7 days

## Other Editorial Duties and Ethical Responsibilities

There is one other matter about which we feel strongly. Please, not to take on other major editorial responsibilities during your term as an AE (e.g., with another journal or a conference committee). If you already have substantial editorial responsibilities elsewhere, I ask you, please, to reflect carefully on whether you are willing to resign these positions.

Accepting the AE position also indicates an acceptance of conditions in relation to suspected or alleged instances of unethical behavior relating to *MISQ* that either you identify or are brought to your attention. Specifically, the conditions are that (1) you will keep the incident confidential unless otherwise advised by the EIC, (2) you will report the incident to the EIC as soon as possible, and (3) you will take no other actions yourself unless otherwise advised by the EIC.

## Your Selection as AE

There are only a few higher honors than to be selected as an AE and it is a tribute to both your scholarship and sense of citizenship that you agree to serve in this capacity. The entire IS community owes a debt of gratitude to those such as yourself who readily volunteer to take on this critical set of tasks.

Thank you for your service to *MISQ* and the IS community!