

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Looking for Diamond Cutters

Each time a new editor assumed the reins at *MIS Quarterly*, I found myself wondering how things would be different and what the change would bode for me. I would like to use this editorial to answer these questions for you. In a nutshell, I am committed to maintaining the high quality that is expected from *MISQ* articles while at the same time increasing the acceptance rate, which is approximately 13 percent.

Now no editor would admit to wanting to lower the quality of the journal which he or she has been charged to guide. And it certainly isn't easy to maintain a journal's quality while increasing the percentage of papers that are accepted. But, I think there is a way to do this that requires the help of reviewers, editors, and authors. It also requires a change in mindset about how to write good reviews. I think as a discipline we are too hard on ourselves. Too few articles are successfully navigating their way through the reviewing process into published form. Too many good ideas are not being developed and disseminated.

As academicians, we are taught to be critical and to consider the many facets of an issue. As educators, we often hone in on what is wrong with our students' work in the hope of assisting them in perfecting their analytical, research, and communication skills. Consequently, when we wear our reviewer's hat, we often focus on what is wrong with the manuscripts that we review. Our challenge is to find the "fatal flaws" that are hidden in these manuscripts. And for the most part we do a great job of keeping problematic papers from being published. That is, as reviewers we tend to be wonderful gatekeepers.

As editor-in-chief of *MISQ*, I would like to encourage another role for reviewers, one that supplements the role of gatekeeper. Having just returned from a delightful sabbatical in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, the analogy of diamond cutters comes to mind. In the diamond cutter's role, reviewers (and the editorial team) work with authors in polishing manuscripts so that the gem can surface and shine. Although expert diamond cutters can camouflage some errors in the diamond, fatal flaws are impossible to conceal. Like diamonds, some manuscripts have fatal flaws which preclude their publication in *MISQ*. Discerning these fatal flaws calls for reviewers who are good gatekeepers. However, I would argue that many of the fatal flaws that have been found in the past are really not fatal in the hands of an expert diamond cutter. I would like to expand *MISQ*'s reviewer base of diamond cutters who are willing to work with rough manuscripts and help transform them into brilliant gems. To accomplish this, *MISQ* needs to expand its reviewer base, as well as change the mindset of many of its reviewers and authors.

Expanding the Reviewer Base

I am frequently impressed with the high quality of the reviews I receive. However, I am aware that often the same reviewers who are preparing thoughtful, timely reviews for *MISQ* are also preparing high-quality reviews for other journals and conferences. That is, editorial teams often use the same trusted base of reviewers. Given the volume of reviewing that is being done in the Information System discipline, this is neither good for this relatively small pool of reviewers nor the discipline. Expanding the base of qualified reviewers can spread the load and ensure that different views are represented. Obvious sources of new

reviewers are from IS subdisciplines and parts of the globe that previously have been underrepresented in terms of the *MISQ* reviewer base. Another source is from students in our doctoral programs.

In terms of developing a global base of reviewers across a broader range of IS subdisciplines, it will be important to encourage those who previously have been unwilling to take the time and effort to review to get involved, and to ask those who are interested but have never been asked. My guess is that the latter represents the much larger group. If you are interested in reviewing and have never been asked, I encourage you to send me your name, contact information, and area of expertise. One of my goals is to eventually build a reviewer database. More immediately I suggest that you enter your name, contact information, and research interests in the ISWorld Faculty Directory at www.isfacdir.org. If you have already entered this information in the database, check it to make sure that it is current and update it if it isn't. I know that I, like many others in the IS community who are looking for reviewers, often turn to the Faculty Directory to find new reviewers.

For those of you who just can't seem to find the time to review, I would counter that reviewing is important for the discipline, and it can yield many benefits. Seeing the repeated problems in others' manuscripts, how other researchers artfully deal with these problems, or how other reviewers who are doing research in your area of research evaluate the papers that you review can help improve your own writing. Contrasting well-written submissions with ones that are not-so-well written is an excellent way of perfecting your own writing skills. Reviewing keeps you abreast of recent developments in methodology and your area of research interest, and it encourages you to be more reflective about your own research.

Reviewing can build your reputation and a social network of grateful editors and colleagues. If you do a good job reviewing, editors or those asking for your reviews will remember your quality work. They will be more willing to provide positive feedback in their letters for tenure and promotion, or in suggesting people to serve in positions of responsibility. Completing timely, high-quality reviews over a period of time is one of the major considerations when making nominations to editorial boards.

Reviewing is both a way improve your writing and an indicator of good citizenship within the IS discipline. If you submit your papers for review, you have an obligation to review. You need to accept invitations to review if you wish to avoid the stigma of being a professional parasite. A rule of thumb is that for every paper you submit for review, you should review three papers because you are asking for three reviewers to take the time on your paper.

Unfortunately, reviewing and editorial efforts often go unrewarded in many universities around the globe. I still remember my surprise when I was told by the personnel committee at a major U.S. research university where I worked that serving on an editorial board was not considered of any value to the university and would be of no consequence in my yearly performance evaluations. The committee members acknowledged that I could report the number of papers that I had reviewed during the year, but that this would have little weight in the evaluation process. I fear that this perception of the reviewing role is clearly the rule, rather than the exception. No one at any university will get promoted or tenured solely on the basis of quality reviewing. I believe that good reviewing should earn extrinsic rewards, but this is the fodder for another editorial.

One other source of reviewers is doctoral students. Clearly *MISQ* needs to be careful in soliciting doctoral students to serve as reviewers. With researchers' careers hanging on editorial decisions, the editorial team must be highly qualified. Sometimes, however, doctoral students at the dissertation stage may be very knowledgeable about the topic. With *careful* supervision, these reviewers can provide valuable input. Although doctoral students seldom review for *MISQ*, there are a number of venues in which they can be incorporated into the reviewing process, most notably for regional conferences.

Many doctoral programs are very concerned about training their students as educators and researchers, and rightfully so. Because reviewing is the lifeblood of our journals, shouldn't we also be training them as reviewers? This can be accomplished in several ways. First, during course work, students could be required to review. They could review papers for which the faculty had received good reviews (hopefully it will not be difficult to find some examples of good reviews). Upon completion of their reviews, the students could see the reviews that the faculty member had received and the reviews could be discussed. Or, students could be required to review one another's papers with the intent of improving them. The faculty member could then provide feedback about the reviews, as well as about the student papers.

Changing the Mindset of Reviewers: Becoming Diamond Cutters

While the reward system for reviewing needs to be changed, it is even more important to change the reviewing mindset. As a discipline, we need to see ourselves less as gatekeepers and more as diamond cutters. Diamond cutters are significantly more developmental when reviewing.

In preparing this editorial, I read extensively about reviewing. To my surprise, there are a considerable number of writings about reviewing, most of which appears to be written by editors. *MISQ* editors are no exception when it comes to writing about reviewing.

One article about reviewing that I found particularly helpful was written by Dave Harrison.¹ His Bill of Rights for Authors offers many important insights about reviewing. Below are his rights and a summary of key points (pp 1080-1083):

1. "Manuscript authors have a right to respectful and courteous interpersonal treatment. ALWAYS." The tone of the comments should be positive and respectful and denigrating comments should be avoided.
2. "Manuscript authors have a right to a full and careful reading of their manuscripts." Reviewers shouldn't fit in manuscript reading during boring meetings or the halftimes of their kid's soccer games. Reviewers should read the paper at least twice, preferably when they aren't in a bad mood.
3. "Manuscript authors have a right to expect criticisms of their work to follow the same standards of logic and evidence applied to themselves." Reviewers should provide enough information to locate the "must-read" references that they recommend. Concerns should be detailed enough that the authors can understand them.
4. "Manuscript authors have a right to expect criticisms of their work will be prioritized." A long laundry list is both discouraging and difficult to interpret. Reviewers should indicate which criticisms and related suggestions are especially important. If the reviewer thinks that the paper suffers from a fatal flaw, this should be indicated early in the review.
5. "Manuscript authors have a right to get feedback about their work in a reasonable span of time." Reviews should be timely. To that end, *MISQ* strives to enforce review deadlines. On the other hand, though, authors should recognize that there are rhythms to academic life. Reviewers may take longer

¹David A. Harrison, "Obligations and Obfuscations in the Review Process," *Academy of Management Journal* (45:6), pp. 1079-1084.

to complete reviews during their holidays (which vary globally) or during peak submission times such as Spring Break in the U.S. schools in March, shortly after ICIS deadlines in early May, or during Northern Hemisphere summers. Further, editors (and in most cases authors) would prefer reviews that are well-thought out rather than those that are thrown together to meet a deadline.

6. "Manuscript authors have a right to expect that their completed manuscript will say what they think is important for them to say." Often works are so dramatically altered during the review process to appease the often conflicting views of reviewers and editors that that finished article, if published, does not accurately represent what the author wanted to say.

I would like to add two more rights to the worthy list suggested by Dave Harrison:

7. Manuscript authors have a right to expect that reviewers will respect their right to write things that do not necessarily agree with what the reviewers have published. Differences of opinion are healthy for any discipline.
8. Manuscript authors have a right to expect that reviewers will excuse themselves in the face of negative bias. If a reviewer previously reviewed an article and knows that they would likely be biased against that article were they to review it again, they should not accept the invitation to review it. They should give the paper a chance by allowing another reviewer to judge its merits. I know this goes against my earlier encouragement to participate in reviewing efforts, but this is one case where the authors would be happy to have another reviewer. If the paper is truly bad enough to reject, then another reviewer should be able to identify its fatal flaw(s).

Finally, I would like to suggest the golden rule for developmental reviewing: **Counter every problem with a suggestion.** It is actually very easy to find problems in manuscripts. The challenge for developmental (diamond cutter) reviewers is to camouflage the problems so that the good ideas shine. For every problem that diamond cutters unearth, they recommend a way of dealing with it. In some cases, this may mean ways of conceiving of or writing about the research that provide needed clarity or a better focus. It can mean providing an alternative theoretical base. In some cases it, may mean modifying the model to avoid problems and highlight the strengths of an intriguing idea. In still other cases, it may mean pointing the authors to methodologies that allow them to more effectively test their theory, or to useful references. The diamond cutter's suggestion may highlight new opportunities for analyzing the data or alternative explanations for the results.

Sometimes the diamond cutter's suggestions can lead to the publication of a manuscript in *MISQ*. The most expert diamond cutters can offer suggestions for rewriting that reposition work to avoid a fatal flaw. In other cases, where there is a fatal flaw that can not be addressed, the suggestions may aid the researcher in conducting the next phase of research or in publishing in a journal with less stringent requirements. Either way, instead of asking "What is wrong with this paper?," the diamond cutter approaches reviewing by focusing on what can be done to make the paper publishable in the appropriate forum.

Fatal Flaws

Papers published in *MISQ* must make a significant contribution. A fatal flaw diminishes a paper's contribution to the point that it can't be published in *MISQ*. Diamond cutter reviewers are very circumspect about what constitutes a fatal flaw. As a matter of fact, they go out of their way to avoid thinking in terms of a fatal

flaw. Developmental reviewing is premised on the assumption that no paper is perfect. That is, the paper may not cite all relevant prior research, incorporate all appropriate constructs into the model, perfectly execute the study, or use the most appropriate methodology. Yet, it may still make a significant contribution.

A basic reading for all reviewers, especially developmental diamond cutters, is Bob Zmud's discussion of fatal flaws.² He suggests that a flaw is fatal when

- "The phenomenon being studied was seen as trivial or unimportant
- Errors occurred in data collection that have corrupted, or otherwise cast doubt on, a study's data
- Errors in logic invalidate a study's theoretical or analytical argumentation
- A study's finding, though statistically significant, explains so little variation that they are meaningless."

Gatekeeper reviewers are often overly eager in identifying a manuscript's fatal flaw. In contrast, diamond cutters acknowledge that no paper is perfect, and focus on ways of dealing with its shortcomings.

Changing the Mindset of Authors: Making the Diamond Cutter's Job Easier

In summary, I intend to do all I can to expand the base of diamond cutter reviewers globally and across Information Systems subdisciplines, and to encourage developmental reviews. I intend to continue such developmental efforts as those described by Allen Lee.³ We are in the process of discussing ways of accommodating the increased number of manuscripts that we hope to publish. However, I must caution authors that with the current number of submissions, *MISQ* can not develop the papers to the point that all submitted papers are published. Due to limited editorial resources, it is likely that diamond cutting efforts will be devoted to manuscripts in which the editorial team sees the greatest potential—it is the one karat and larger gems that will be developed.

Many years ago when I was bemoaning my first manuscript rejection (of many), I complained to a colleague that the reviewers had gotten it all wrong. My colleague kindly told me that was my fault. It was my job to write clearly enough so that the reviewers could easily understand what I was trying to say. I realize now how right he was.

To ensure that your paper will be viewed in the most favorable light during the review process, do not submit papers "hot off the press." While editorial teams may want to be developmental, they may not have the time needed to fully develop extremely rough ideas, or they might not be able to see any potential in papers that have not been adequately developed. Your paper's potential is more likely to be realized if you take a number of steps before submitting it:

²Robert W. Zmud, "A Personal Perspective on the State of Journal Refereeing," *MIS Quarterly* (22:3), September 1998, pp. xlv-xlvi (available online at <http://www.misq.org/archivist/vol/no22/issue3/edstat.html#state>).

³Allen S. Lee, "The Role of Information Technology in Reviewing and Publishing Manuscripts in *MIS Quarterly* (23:4), December 1999, pp. lv-lx (available online at <http://misq.org/archivist/vol/no23/issue4/edstat.html>).

1. Vet the paper at workshops and conferences.
2. Ask colleagues to read the paper and offer suggestions.
3. Carefully read and apply journal guidelines (see *MISQ's* guidelines under "Information for Prospective Authors" at <http://www.misq.org/roadmap/standards.html>).
4. Hire a professional to edit the paper, especially if English is not your native language.
5. Critically assess problems with your paper and address them before you send it off. (Don't count on the editorial team missing the problems in your paper. Usually they not only see these problems, but also a myriad of other problems.)

An Overdue Recognition

Finally, Ron Weber and I would like to recognize the yeoman efforts of Ritu Agarwal as Senior Editor. She became an SE in May 2001 and her term was extended an additional six months beyond the normal three years. She retired from the board on December 31, 2004, with Peter Todd, Allen Lee, and Ron Weber. She, like these other three, is still serving as SE on the large number of manuscripts that she initiated during her term. In our minds, she epitomizes an expert diamond cutter and *MISQ* has benefitted considerably from her efforts. We send you our most heartfelt thanks, Ritu!

Special Thanks

Though I have just started my new role as editor-in-chief, I must acknowledge the help I have already received from Bob Zmud, Allen Lee, and, especially, Ron Weber. All three, in different ways, are wonderful examples for the role. Bob and Allen have provided thoughtful responses to the many questions that I have asked. Ron has also provided invaluable advice and did all he could to ease the transition. Ron's attitude and approach to his editorial role serve as a model for me. He clearly believes that the role of editor-in-chief is one of service. His humble attitude is reflected in the thoughtful and especially kind reviews that he writes. Yet, he has taken forceful, well-conceived, and well-stated positions on the leading issues of our field. I am fortunate to start this new role with wonderful role models and a great team of Senior and Associate Editors.

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