

## Editor's Comments

# Total Quality Management of Journal Reviews

Total quality management, or TQM, is transforming business. Factory workers are mastering statistical quality control techniques, firms are requiring their suppliers to initiate TQM programs, while autonomous work groups focus on Six Sigma<sup>1</sup> quality targets. Business schools, though handicapped by disciplinary specialization, are beginning to respond. A recent study, commissioned by the Graduate Management Admission Council, found quality management to be one of seven major new themes emerging as U.S. business schools redesign their MBA programs.<sup>2</sup> The Society for Information Management (SIM) has also recognized the importance of the quality initiative for the systems profession. SIM has established a series of regional working groups in the U.S. to study the role of quality management in information management.

These ubiquitous quality initiatives inspire reflection on what quality management might mean for the *MIS Quarterly*. For several reasons, it should attract our attention as information systems researchers and managers. First, there are ample opportunities to improve the quality of systems products (and educational programs). Second, systems departments are well positioned to assist the firm in implementing required systems for measuring and achieving quality improvements. Finally, quality programs can provide the hunting licenses that sanction the analysis and re-engineering of processes that transcend functional and organizational boundaries. We welcome, encourage, and look forward to submissions that further our understanding in any of these broad areas.

Quality management can also be applied to the *Quarterly's* own processes for evaluating, enhancing, and publishing articles. The senior editorial and publishing staff of the *Quarterly* is committed to continuous improvement in all phases of our operation. We have instituted measurement systems to track and monitor the review process as well as the quality of our reviewers and associate editors. Submitted articles are reviewed by a panel<sup>3</sup> of reviewers. These written reviews are used by the associate editor to assess the submitted article. But the associate editor also provides evaluations of the reviews. These are then entered into a reviewer database. Reviewers who have a short history of missing, late, or poor-quality reviews are disqualified from reviewing. Our reviewer quality database is used for only one other purpose—the selection of our associate editors; the appointment of an *MIS Quarterly* associate editor is formal recognition of quality reviewing. But appointment to an associate editor slot does not free an individual from being evaluated. We continue to evaluate both the quality and timeliness of their contributions. Similarly, the senior editors encourage and welcome feedback from all members of our community.

Someone asked me recently, "Since I'm not paid for reviewing, how can you justify evaluating my reviews or dropping me from your list of reviewers?" The answer is at the heart of the peer evaluation process. First, appointment to certain editorial boards can be an important academic career milestone; good reviews can lead to such appointments, while a pattern of inferior, late, or non-completed reviews will preclude these invitations. Second, associate and senior editors know who their best reviewers are; good reviewers attract supporters who can assist a career in a variety of ways. Third, peer reviews are at the very center of the research process and a professional responsibility. I recently learned of a young researcher who,

<sup>1</sup> Refers to the number of errors per unit of work. A One Sigma (or standard deviation) process would produce errors in 32 percent of the work units. Six Sigma processes are designed to operate at a defect level of .000002 percent.

<sup>2</sup> Hudis, P.M. and Kagehiro, S.A. "Management Education for the Future: Graduate Business Schools Respond to a Changing Environment," May 1992 (MPR Associates Inc., 1995 University Avenue, Suite 225, Berkeley, California, 94704).

<sup>3</sup> Review panels consist of at least four reviewers. One is almost always a practitioner.

though he had several articles under review and another already published in the *Quarterly*, repeatedly refused invitations to write reviews. In another case, I had spent most of a day extensively editing the most recent revision of an article and was later disappointed to see that the article's author had failed to respond to a review request. Such professionally parasitic behavior is troubling, misguided, and usually inexcusable.

The fourth justification also applies to the generous practitioners who serve as volunteer reviewers; reviewing articles helps you stay current in an area of expertise or interest; you will see articles months before they are published.<sup>4</sup> Finally, and of paramount importance, quality research demands quality reviews. A weak review, even from a well-intentioned volunteer, wastes the time of the reviewer, the author, and the editors. It sets a poor standard and is disheartening for other reviewers. Yes, we hurt volunteers' feelings by dropping them from our list, but we damage the discipline if we continue to request reviews from weak reviewers.

If our field is to reach its full potential, each of us must strive to add new value to this critical process. Some senior people, I suspect, would like to leave the reviewing task to assistant professors. I strongly disagree. Assistant professors usually have solid methodological skills and many provide excellent reviews. But experience provides a broader perspective and a richer understanding of information systems within an organizational context. Less experienced scholars may see the weaknesses of an article, but look past its potential. I was therefore delighted to discover among our best reviewers the names of some of our own past senior and associate editors, well known consultants, senior information systems executives, members of other editorial boards, and scores of our past authors. But, I am always disappointed when I see "no response" written next to a name that I had hoped would provide a first-rate review.

The *MIS Quarterly* is fortunate to have hundreds of dedicated reviewers. Some are excellent and many of the remainder are good to very good. But quality management pushes us toward universal excellence. That requires education. All new reviewers receive a package of materials intended to aid them in writing quality reviews. Contact our offices in Minnesota if you would like a copy. And, as you know, if you have reviewed an article for us recently, we send each reviewer copies of the associate editor and other reviewers' comments. We have at times in the past been slow in getting these back to you; we will do better in the future. This feedback can show how others approached the same task. It also provides an opportunity to compare your review to those of others. We are also now considering an exciting new program that could provide advanced doctoral students with both an opportunity to review and personalized feedback. I am delighted to report that Professor Izak Benbasat, former *MIS Quarterly* Senior Editor of Theory and Research, has agreed to rejoin the *Quarterly's* editorial board and to help us design this important initiative.

How can we add value to a paper? Many reviewers, particularly less experienced reviewers, see their role as that of a gatekeeper. "Publish with no changes," is still a too frequent prescription, particularly from a new practitioner reviewer. At the other extreme are reviewers intent on spotting the "fatal flaw," which they sometimes seem to believe frees them from further review. Unfortunately, neither approach adds value to the submission. Often such reviews can be counterproductive. An unsubstantiated positive review carries little weight with most editors. There is after all, no evidence that the reviewer is either familiar with the material or has carefully studied the article. Unfortunately, an inexperienced author may argue that such an endorsement should counterbalance a carefully crafted but negative evaluation. Similarly, the identification of fatal errors, though necessary in safeguarding the journal from serious mistakes, is only one aspect of a good review. A journal is, after all, known for the articles it publishes rather than those it rejects!

A high-quality reviewer can add value in many ways. He or she can highlight the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the article, can provide useful references (with citations), and can provide new analysis opportunities, alternative theoretical underpinnings, different explanations for results, communications improvements, a clearer focus, further extensions, implications for practice, and even suggestions for rewriting that can reposition the work so as to avoid the fatal errors. A reviewer can also add value by

<sup>4</sup> However, it is generally considered unacceptable to cite or forward to others articles that have been entrusted to your review.

informing the editor of the areas of the review that he or she feels qualified (or unqualified) to comment on. For instance, if you as a reviewer are unfamiliar with the particular statistical technique or some of the literature, let the editor know. A good reviewer is also sensitive to the author's feelings and, even while rejecting a submission, might offer encouragement, suggest alternative outlets, or propose new modes of attack. On the other hand, most editors find sarcastic or demeaning reviews to be unprofessional, unjustifiable, and disagreeable. A reviewer must never forget that an author's career may be riding on this article or even this review. Or the author may be a new graduate attempting his or her first publication.

Having quality reviewers is a key strategic requirement for quality research. Some reviewers describe these responsibilities as professional "service." I prefer the word "leadership." Leadership means more than just composing excellent reviews. We must set high standards for ourselves and for others. If we keep our expectations high our journals, scholars, and readers will all share in the rewards. But we must provide education, mentoring, and opportunities to start afresh. Our database of reviewer evaluations is not intended to lock willing, enthusiastic, and revitalized reviewers permanently out of the review process. A reviewer who has not received a review request from us for a year or two and who suspects he or she may have been disqualified should give Mark Saarinen a call or send him a note. That, and a personal commitment to quality, is all that is required to requalify. And, if you have not reviewed for us before, and would like to, please complete the "Invitation to Become a Reviewer" form, included in this issue. In either case we will be delighted to watch quality reviews emerge.

Continuous improvement is central to quality management. So too is team work. Our team of editors, reviewers, and prospective authors is large and scattered throughout the world. Neither size nor dispersion, however, precludes cooperation, shared values, or a mutual commitment to excellence. I am hopeful that this essay may be of some value to a new member of our team or a weaker player. The real intended audience, however, includes the many talented and valued team members who are already writing quality reviews. We are thankful for your past contributions and know by these contributions that you are committed to quality. We hope that you will "sign on" to our journey of continuous improvement. This means something different than raising the bar we expect prospective authors to hurdle. Rather, let's inspire each other—reviewers, editors, and publications staff—to set our personal expectations for adding value a few notches higher.

The long-run reward will be the progress of our field and our careers. The short-run rewards will come in looking at quality published articles and being able to proudly recall, "I added value to that work!"<sup>5</sup>

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I am pleased to report that Gerardine DeSanctis has agreed to become our Senior Editor for Theory and Research when we lose the services of Mike Ginzberg in that post this December. Gerry, a member of the University of Minnesota's faculty, is a former member of the *MISQ* editorial board. I am also delighted to announce that Rudy Hirschheim of the University of Houston and Wanda Orlikowski of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have agreed to join the *MISQ* editorial board.

With this issue, Haim Mendelson completes his service on the board. We are most appreciative of his contributions to *MISQ*.

—Blake Ives

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<sup>5</sup> We encourage authors to footnote the specific contributions of anonymous reviewers and associate editors.