

MIS Quarterly

The SE Role¹ 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 SE Role

The SE is the final decision maker in reviewing submissions for *MISQ*. SEs, after considering the recommendation of the AE and the input from reviewers, make the sole determination about which papers are published, which papers will be returned for revision, and which papers will not move forward in the review cycle. Only in the rarest of circumstances would an EIC ever be forced to reverse an SE decision. Since these are so rare, little time need be spent on elaboration, but an incident of plagiarism that is discovered between acceptance and publication would be one such example.

SEs work closely with AEs. In fact, the SE and the AE 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*.²

Personal Rewards of Serving as SE

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

When a paper you have edited appears in preprint 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.

¹Terms-of-art in this document include: SE (Senior Editor); EIC (Editor-in-Chief); AE (Associate Editor); 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.).

²Manuscripts 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.**

Another tangible benefit of serving as SE 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.

Your influence on choosing stimulating work for publication also extends to informing the structural decisions that lead to new venues for research. SEs are involved in the vetting of special issues, in determining the shape and form of special processes (such as the vetted submission process discussed next), and in creating new journal policy. One of the critical roles of SEs is in advising the EIC on new editorial board appointments at both the SE and AE levels. This allows you to exert your influence on who will be the next set of key adjudicators for the journal.

Procedure for Handling Papers through the Regular Process

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 regular process.

1. **Make a decision about the manuscript for this round of reviewing.** Each round, you, as SE, make the final decision 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.

In this regard, you should be informed by the AE (and, when available, reviewers) without allowing these views to determine your decision. In colloquial terms, this is not a democracy. It is a hierarchy and the EIC delegates sole authority to you in the handling and disposition of the manuscript.

As an indicator of the responsibility embedded in your role, we had had cases at *MISQ* where an SE accepted a paper in spite of negative recommendations by an AE and all three reviewers. The bottom line is that your experience as to what constitutes a contribution to IS research is the ultimate criterion. Your SE appointment is a recognition that you can adopt a high level, holistic view that may not be in the purview of the rest of the review team.

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 SEs 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 the authors will engage in a large scale, risky revision, and you may see the paper again later.

2. **Send authors screening report.** Upon reading the manuscript, if you determine by yourself that the paper should not continue any further in the review process, then you as SE write the authors a screening report that explains your reasons for rejection, offering constructive suggestions about how the authors can pursue their research. If you feel that the paper shows some promise, you can opt for reject, but invite new submission, which means that if the authors engage in the large scale, risky revisions you outline, you may see the paper again later.

Alternatively, your screening report may focus on changes that you would like to see in the paper even before you contact an AE. In certain cases, these revisions may be extensive enough to increase your level of confidence in the paper to the point where it will allow you to signal the AE more strongly that you think the paper shows promise.

Once you determine that a manuscript shows sufficient promise that you want to move it into the regular reviewing process, its chances for eventual acceptance have gone up quite a bit. This process will preempt endless cycles of revisions of papers that are finally rejected on the n^{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 an AE and sign them up for the paper.** If your reading of the paper indicates that the paper should continue in the review process, you will next contact an AE about the paper. Your choices are the current AE board, or, where appropriate, a special AE whose expertise is a good fit for the paper. In either case, the AE must agree via email to you to handle the paper expeditiously and to fulfill the responsibilities of an AE.
4. **Signal the AE your views about the paper.** You will want to clearly communicate your impressions and initial assessment of the paper to the AE. 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 AE to make an independent judgment. If s/he sees fatal flaws, then 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.³ 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 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.

³Possible language to convey this to the AE is as follows: “If you are willing to serve as AE on this paper, I would like us to communicate our views to each other prior to your writing up a formal report. It would be best if we can reach consensus as a team and thereby not convey a mixed message to the authors. I have briefly outlined above why I see promise in the paper and believe that it could offer a solid research contribution. Of course, I need your own independent judgment about the chances of the paper succeeding in the review process. 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.”

This 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 AE 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 AE will find fatal flaws, however.

To short-circuit this laborious process, you should communicate informally with the AE about the prospects for the paper either by point-to-point emails, by telephone, or (rarely) in person. Many of these ideas will eventually find their way into the written reports, but the key here is that, if at all possible, there is a building of consensus by the editors before the official written reports.

Consider innovating through more informal interactions with the AE (and authors, for that matter). These can take place through email and richer media like the telephone and Skype video. Asynchronous and synchronous communications can both be used.

While it is not necessary that you and the AE hold exactly the same views with respect to the manuscript, both you and the AE will eventually write reports. In this case, your SE report and the AE report are both sent to the authors via the "system," keeping in mind that only your decision ultimately counts.⁴

5. **Consider the AE initial feedback.** You have two options after hearing the AE's initial feedback. If the AE recommends rejection (either an outright rejection or a reject, but invite new submission), and if you concur, ask the AE to write-up a screening report. Add to this report to your own SE screening report, and send both to the authors.

IF the AE says the paper is ready for reviewers, and you agree, then proceed to step 6 below.

6. **Choose reviewers and have the AE sign them up for the paper.** Once the AE has provided feedback that indicates that s/he feels the paper is ready for review and you concur, work with the AE 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.
7. **Direct AE to handle the review process for the current round.** At this point, you can turn the review process over to the AE. Once the AE has received a sufficient number of reviews (often two is enough, especially when a third reviewer is slowing up the process), direct the AE to prepare her/his recommendation. Ideally, it would be useful if you and the AE shared offline impressions about the sum and substance of the reviewer reports before a formal, written report is sent in to you. This is, again, an attempt to build consensus and to avoid conflict between the editors. If you do disagree on the disposition of the paper, that is fine, but consensus is always preferable.
8. **Write your SE report and inform the authors.** Depending on the extent to which your own views are fully reflected in the AE report, your report will be longer or shorter. There may be some points that the AE and reviewers are not knowledgeable about, and in these cases, you may need to elaborate.

⁴A highly effective way of structuring authorial responses to the review team comments is the three column table. Here is a template for communicating this to the authors: "Assuming you choose to revise, please send me a three column response document. First separate the review team comments (including mine) into separate ideas. In column 1, please number the comment, in column 2 put the review team comment, and in column 3 goes your response. You do not need to always agree with the reviewers, but in lieu of compliance and correction, you will need to present a good argument for why you prefer another direction. Numbering the comments makes it easy to reference how you addressed a point in a previous response. Please do not abbreviate. Copy the review team comments verbatim into the table."

Authors often have questions about the SE report and the comments from the rest of the team. Certainly, you are free to address these directly with the authors. And it is a good practice to carefully document these *ad hoc* comments since they may come up again during the rest of the review process.

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.

9. Be extremely careful that you do not send the authors a report that identifies names of reviewers or the AE. Authors are BCC-ed on the e-mail that Manuscript Central automatically sends with your decision and the salutation on that e-mail protects identities since it is addressed only to "authors." Be sure also not to identify any authors in your correspondence.

Procedure for Handling Papers through the Vetted Submission Process

A new, experimental process at *MISQ* is that SEs are now also invited to proactively seek out a limited set of papers (a.k.a. "vetted submissions"). Ordinarily, SEs are asked by the Minnesota staff to take on unsolicited papers that are either in their area of expertise or papers that do not have a good match with the current SE pool. In the latter case, SEs have to rely more heavily on the expertise of their review team, but they are still the final decision maker.

SEs may also actively seek out good work through direct contact with authors. Suffice it to say, this needs to be a proactive search on the part of SEs and not a proactive search by authors. In short, unsolicited papers that SEs personally receive through email or paper copies should be redirected into the regular *MISQ* reviewing process.

Extremely promising papers may come to the attention of an SE through many previously vetted routes. Let's speak of one excellent source of inspiration and allow SEs the latitude of making reasonable generalizations from that one case to others since we cannot possibly cover all the viable sources.

Suppose you read and/or sit in on a paper presentation at ICIS/WITS/WISE or other pre-ICIS venues. And suppose this paper has been nominated for "Best Paper." If you like what you hear (and read) and also gauge the audience response as positive, this could be a candidate. Approach the authors. Besides encouraging them to submit the paper to *MISQ* with you as the SE, the only other point that you will need to make is that you cannot, naturally, guarantee acceptance, but that you believe that the likelihood that the paper will eventually be published is significantly higher than the normal odds. Moreover, with respect to previous vetting, inform the authors that the process can be greatly speeded up if they, the authors, send you previous reviews and feedback, blinded to protect identities. The authors will need to clear this themselves with previous program chairs and/or journal editors, possibly, but the authors need to understand that the responsibility for addressing privacy concerns rests with them and not *MISQ*.

Ensuring that no confidentiality have been breached in the sharing of this information, the authors can send this directly to you through Manuscript Central. Ask them to include in a cover letter to you the simple provenance statement that

“The reviews and feedback attached to this cover letter have been approved for sharing with you as an *MISQ* SE by persons in charge of the relevant reviewing processes. All identities of prior evaluators have been blinded to protect privacy.”

How you handle the paper from this point forward is described in the numbered procedures below, but the central issue to focus on here is that prior vetting is a plus for the authors and this needs to be conveyed to them. All review processes have both positive and negative feedback in them, and the authors need not be overly worried that our editors will focus on the negative comments to the exclusion of the positive.

1. **Send the authors a follow-up communiqué to your initial approach.** The initial approach you take to authors is described above for the case of important, peer-refereed conferences like ICIS, etc. In whatever manner you originally communicated with the authors, begin a process of exchanging information through e-mails shortly thereafter. If they are able to provide previous reviews or feedback, you can summarize this for the review team and this can act as additional evidence in informing your decision.⁵ One key point to note about these authorial documents, for example, would be whether the submitted version of the manuscript has responded sufficiently to prior feedback.
2. **Choose your review team.** Please exercise your own judgment about who and how much further reviewing is required for individual papers. If you feel confident that this can be sufficiently reviewed by just yourself and one AE, then let that be the case. If you prefer two AEs only, or, say, fewer than the usual three reviewers, that is also quite acceptable. Part of the experiment with this proactive process is to find out how comfortable we feel with varying numbers of members on the review team, given that some prior vetting has already occurred.

Keep in mind that very small review teams are run-of-the-mill in other business disciplines like Finance. In Finance, they most typically have only one, senior reviewer per paper.

3. **Follow regular review process from this point forward.** Keep in mind that the experimental, vetted process is only an experiment in process, not in content. In short, we still want the highest quality papers for the journal and cannot settle for anything less. The only additional consideration is that, as in the regular process, we rarely find near perfect papers in all dimensions. So what we do want are papers that take on an exciting new direction in thought, but may have a few methodological flaws that we can live with. What we definitely do not want are papers that are nearly perfect in technique, but, in truth, of little intellectual interest.

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 share them with any other parties. 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.

⁵Since we need to be vigilant about privacy, please do not quote from the previous feedback in your summaries. Just stress the main points for the rest of the review team so they can offer independent judgments about the responsiveness of the authors to prior vetting.

As an SE, 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 privy information. All of this is to be treated as confidential and not disclosed to any parties who do not already have access to it.

Ethics

Accepting the role of SE 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.

SE 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 the EIC 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 SEs as there are authors. In short, you will likely have to stretch at times to be able to provide reasonable feedback to the authors, but that is business-as-usual. This is not to say that you might at some point be asked to review a paper that is entirely out of your ken. Hopefully such cases are rare, and that most of the time you will be able to draw upon your specific and general knowledge of the research in IS and 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 SEs 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 SEs, 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:

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| 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 Senior Editorial responsibilities during your term as an SE (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 SE 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 SE

There are few higher honors than to be selected as an SE 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!