EDITOR’S COMMENTS:  
WHY REVIEW? BECAUSE REVIEWING IS A PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As an AMR reader, you may receive requests to review for the journal, and you may ask yourself, "Why should I review this paper when I'm so busy with other personal and professional obligations?" I'd like to propose here that reviewing is a professional responsibility—a view I conveyed at a recent AMR editors’ meeting. I thank AMR’s editor, Martin Kilduff, for offering me this forum so that I can convey my perspective more broadly to my Academy colleagues.

I have long known how essential quality reviewing is to our journals. The previous basis for this knowledge was my experience as a journal board member for many years (who regularly reviewed papers for AMR, AMJ, and other journals) and as a submitter to the journal and recipient of reviews (I’ve managed to publish a few AMR papers over the years, and even win a Best Article Award, but most often I was rejected just like everyone else). As an author, I’ve sometimes closed my office door and railed at reviewers, expletives undeleted. But when I receive constructive and thorough reviews (even negative ones), I often have to admit that the reviewers have a point, and once I get over my disappointment, I generally find them useful for revising and improving the paper.

As an associate editor, I now deliberate about the assignment of reviewers. Recognizing how important a publication in AMR can be to someone’s career, I take this responsibility seriously. I aim to select reviewers who will be knowledgeable about the topic, read the paper carefully, and provide detailed, developmental feedback to the author and clear guidance to me about the proper decision regarding the manuscript. This is particularly important when the paper falls somewhat outside my own knowledge area.

My biggest disappointment as an associate editor has been to learn that some of my Academy colleagues decline most, if not all, requests to review. Some of these colleagues are among the most well-known and distinguished in the Academy. Their work is frequently cited in AMR submissions, and a number of them continue to submit their own work to the journal. When a request to review is declined, our managing editor informs the associate editor in a brief email note and asks for another potential reviewer to replace the one who declined. This can take several days to a week (if we receive a reply at all), slowing down the review process. Here is one such recent email that I received from the managing editor (edited to remove names): “Could you please suggest some more reviewers for this paper? Reviewer A declined his invitation (see below). Reviewer B and Reviewer C accepted their invitations. D, E, F, and G declined their invitations. Reviewer H has not responded to repeated emails.”

After receiving messages such as this one, I began asking whether these “decliners” gave reasons for saying no. Of course, I understand that declining invitations to review is sometimes necessary if the review will be impossible to complete, given serious life events such as illness. I also recognize that declining a request to review is ethically essential if the prospective reviewer cannot provide an objective review because of a conflict of interest (e.g., the prospective reviewer knows the author’s identity and has coauthored work with that person, is at the same institution, or is in a mentor-protege relationship with the author). I sometimes have to decline reviews myself (and it’s better to decline quickly than to not deliver). But some of those who decline provide no reason at all, some simply don’t respond, and some say that they don’t review, period. This last response is particularly troubling.

Perhaps I’m old-fashioned to think that peer review is an essential professional value and a duty to the profession. I hope my Academy colleagues share this value, but maybe it bears repeating. When I think about why I value peer review, there are two essential reasons—one

 Thanks to David Harrison and Martin Kilduff for their comments on previous versions.
instrumental and one values based. First, scholarly journals simply cannot operate effectively without a strong peer review system, which has been central to science for more than 300 years (Weller, 2001). Certainly, the internet has made it possible to post working papers so that others may comment on them. Some of you may believe that such a system is preferable because it speeds information into the marketplace of ideas and opens up what many perceive to be a closed system. In such a system, anyone can publish anything (Laine & Mulrow, 2003). Put it out there and let the marketplace decide. This may sound good in theory, but it fails in practice. I don’t know about you, but I rarely read working papers posted on the web. I simply don’t have time. I count on quality journals to sift through the huge amounts of information available and to signal what is most worth reading, worth assigning as required reading in doctoral seminars, worth taking into account in my own research, and worth translating for students and practitioners in my textbook. Although we all know that top-tier journals make mistakes, recent research suggests that many of you agree with me, because, in your own research, you are more likely to cite work that has been published in the field’s top-tier journals (Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007).

So, obviously, if it is instrumental for the development of useful knowledge in our field, we need to convince our colleagues to review. How do you feel about moving to an economic model that would charge people to publish in our journals and pay others to do reviews? I don’t believe that’s how a “profession” should operate, and I’m not at all convinced that the reviews would be high-quality ones if we moved to a purely economic exchange model. My time is valuable. I doubt the journals could pay me enough to make it worthwhile in an economic calculation. And the quality of my reviews might even decline if I perceive that I’m doing the review for the extrinsic reward (Deci & Ryan, 1985). I do believe that reviewing has instrumental intrinsic value. Through reviewing I learn about others’ work, new ideas, methods, and references that I may have missed in my own research. Reviewing for a top journal such as AMR provides the opportunity to help improve some of the most influential publications in our field. Helping to shape these future publications can contribute significantly to the direction of the field. All of that should be meaningful to us as professionals and should motivate us to review.

Yet there is another reason, perhaps even more compelling, to review. Reviewing is an ethical responsibility. A utilitarian perspective would have us consider the harms and benefits to multiple stakeholders of the decision to review or not. As long as we think beyond ourselves, reviewing clearly benefits the greater good. The authors benefit, the journal benefits, and consumers of research benefit if more of us are willing to review. We’re all busy, and it’s easy to focus on ourselves and our many time commitments. But if we widen the lens to take consequences to others into account, the decision to review is quite straightforward.

Moral rules such as the Golden Rule would also support the decision to review. If we want others to provide quality reviews of our work, we should be willing to do the same for them. I’ve heard many colleagues say that when they submit to our journals, although they hope for acceptance, they are realistic about their chances, given the low acceptance rates at top-tier journals (between 5 and 10 percent). So we then hope for the very best reviews possible—reviews that will help us improve our work for the current journal or the next one. We won’t grow as scholars if we don’t receive high-quality reviews of our work. And, as a profession, we will not thrive if we have members who only “take” and are unwilling to “give back” by reviewing their colleagues’ manuscripts. At a minimum, we should be willing to review for the journals in which we seek to publish our own work. Does this mean that declining to review for such journals is unethical? I believe it is unless it is for a good reason—a reason that one would accept for everyone.

In our AMR editors’ meeting last summer, someone asked whether individuals should be allowed to submit to Academy journals if they don’t contribute to the reviewing process. The fact that we even discussed this possibility suggests how serious an issue this is for the journal and for the profession. Some journals now advise submitters that submission of a manuscript carries an implicit agreement that the submitter will be willing to review for the journal. AMR currently includes this “quid pro quo” idea as part of the submission process (see the Information for Contributors in each issue and available
on the web). AMR’s statement says, “Submission of a manuscript . . . also carries an implicit quid pro quo: willingness to review for AMR. The cornerstone of the editorial process at AMR is the willingness of colleagues to provide each other feedback through peer review. Authors who submit manuscripts to AMR for review are expected to reciprocate by reviewing for AMR if called on to do so.”

As ethics ombudsperson for the Academy (another Academy role I play), it occurred to me that perhaps we should consider adding a statement of this responsibility to our ethics code and enforce it. It’s fine for someone to “opt out” of reviewing. But, if so, shouldn’t that individual “opt out” of the submission process too? The Academy journals now have a very efficient web-based tracking system, so these individuals are easily identifiable. What do you think? Should we consider enforcing the quid pro quo expectation in some way? Why or why not? If so, how would you recommend we do so?

For those of you who regularly provide timely, thoughtful, constructive, and courteous reviews, bless you! For those of you who decline to review quickly when you have good reasons (and provide those reasons along with your regrets), thank you! For those of you who are still developing your reviewing skills, I refer you to David Harrison’s excellent “bill of rights” for manuscript authors published in AMJ (Harrison, 2002). For those of you who agree that we should treat reviewing as an ethical responsibility and incorporate it into our Academy of Management ethics code, let me know (ltrevino@psu.edu), and I’ll pass your views along. Thanks!

REFERENCES

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