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FROM THE EDITORS:

TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF *AMJ*'S REVIEWER EVALUATION FORM

One of the inspirations for this "From the Editors" column occurred at an Academy doctoral consortium a few years ago. A fourth-year Ph.D. student asked a common question: "How do I know what journals are looking for in my manuscripts?" Although a number of responses are possible, to be sure, the reply came, "Look at their reviewer evaluation form—that's a good place to start." It was clear from the student's quizzical expression that he had no idea that journals even had such forms, much less what was likely to be on one of them. Subsequent consortia brought similar sentiments from doctoral students and junior faculty, with the modal responses often resembling "Form? There's a form?" Perhaps such responses should not be surprising. Although journals frequently print their mission statement and style guides within their pages and on their Websites, we anticipate that locating the reviewer evaluation forms at most major journals would be a daunting task.

With that in mind, the purpose of this editorial is to describe *AMJ*'s reviewer evaluation form and to demystify it in the process of doing so. We begin this process by showing the reviewer evaluation form that *AMJ* is currently using in Figure 1. We believe that a guided tour of the form could prove helpful to potential contributors for three reasons. First, the *Journal's* action editors (the editor, the associate editors, and Special Research Forum guest editors) use the responses on the form and the reviewers' narrative comments, together with their own independent judgments of manuscripts, as the foundation for reaching their editorial decisions. Our own sense is that different editors use the information on the form differently. Some editors may give equal time and attention to reviewers' ratings of specific criteria and reviewers' bottom-line recommendations. Other editors may deemphasize one or more of the criteria appearing on the form, focusing their attention on the reviewers' recommendations. After all, reviewer ratings, like the ratings on any five-point scale, may be influenced by transient and dispositional sources of affect (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the evaluation form may help reviewers organize their comments and their thoughts, shaping the way they arrive at their bottom-line recommendation. A 40–50 page manuscript can trigger a seemingly endless list of comments. The nine criteria on the evaluation form yield categories around which reviewers can frame their comments and observations. The ratings of specific criteria should then have a strong effect on reviewers' bottom-line recommendations. Most of that effect is substantive, as manuscripts with higher ratings on the criteria are typically more deserving of a revision than those with lower ratings on the criteria. However, some of that effect may also be artifactual. Discussions of common method variance describe how a pattern of prior responses can influence responses on a given survey item. Thus, the ratings of the specific criteria on the form may influence the bottom-line recommendation through item ordering and item context effects, as reviewers look to make their recommendations consistent with their prior responses (Harrison, McLaughlin, & Coalter, 1996; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Reviewers should be aware of this possibility when evaluating individual manuscripts.

The third reason for providing a better understand of *AMJ*'s reviewer evaluation form is that it can help foster a better understanding of the *Journal* itself. As Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) noted, a journal develops a culture encompassing its core values, beliefs, and assumptions (Schein, 1985). From this perspective, the reviewer evaluation form represents a cultural artifact by serving as a tangible manifestation of those values, beliefs, and assumptions. If a first-time submitter wants to get a feel for the kinds of articles that *AMJ* values, taking a look at the criteria on the form is a good place to start; the criteria listed clearly signal the most important characteristics the editorial team seeks. Other cultural artifacts are available as well, including *AMJ*'s mission statement, its "Information for Contributors" section, and previously published "From the Editors" commentaries. Of those artifacts, however, only the reviewer evaluation form sits in front of every reviewer as she or he makes a recommendation.

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the meaning of each criterion appearing on *AMJ*'s reviewer evaluation form. We should say though that some disclaimers are in order. First and foremost, these viewpoints describe the current editorial team's perspective. Past, present, and future editors

FIGURE 1
***AMJ*'s Reviewer Evaluation Form**

Criteria	Completely inadequate	Weak	Modest	Strong	Very Strong
Appropriateness for AMJ				✓	
Clarity of exposition			✓		
Technical adequacy			✓		
Theoretical contribution (i.e. testing, creating, or extending theory)			✓		
Empirical contribution			✓		
Interestingness, innovativeness, and novelty			✓		
Potential implications for practice				✓	
Potential significance of contribution				✓	
Magnitude of contribution relative to length			✓		

If you recommend revision:		
Should this manuscript be reduced in length?		No
If yes, by approximately how many pages?		
If yes, what material might be deleted without detriment?		
Is the title appropriate?		
If no, how might it be improved (e.g. more descriptive, more interesting)?		

	Recommendation
	Accept
	Accept with Minor Revision
✓	Promising but needs Major Revision
	Doubtful
	Reject

may hold different interpretations, as might individual editorial board members and ad hoc reviewers. Many of the criteria on the reviewer evaluation form capture broad and multifaceted concepts, suggesting the possibility that different readers may emphasize different facets when judging a paper's quality. In addition, it is important to note that the nine criteria on the form are not independent. If one were to conduct a sort of conceptual factor analysis, it would be clear that opinions about some items are wrapped up in viewpoints about other items. With those disclaimers in mind, let us commence with our discussion of *AMJ*'s reviewer evaluation form.

Appropriateness for *AMJ*

This criterion gauges whether *AMJ* is an appropriate outlet for a given submission or whether another journal would be more fitting as a potential home. One of the best ways of judging appropriateness is to compare the focus of a submission with the targeted journal's mission statement. *AMJ*'s mission statement (which appears in each issue of the *Journal* and which is available on the *Journal*'s Website) indicates that *AMJ* publishes empirical research that tests, extends, or builds management theory and contributes to management practice, using a variety of methods (qualitative, quantitative, field, laboratory, meta-analytic, and combination methods). As a "big tent journal," *AMJ*'s mission must be broad enough to encompass the domains represented by the Academy of Management's Divisions and Interest Groups. That breadth should trigger a cautionary note when reviewers are tempted to label a manuscript as inappropriate. Just because a manuscript uses a different method or appeals to a different audience than one's own work may not mean the manuscript is wrong for the *Journal*. If a paper is an attempt to contribute to management theory and practice using empirical methods, including qualitative inquiry, chances are good that *AMJ* stands as an appropriate outlet.

Clarity of Exposition

The purpose of academic journals is to make the results of research public, so that "what we know" evolves via the cumulative and self-correcting nature of science (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). If an article's descriptions and explanations are unclear, the fulfillment of that purpose is seriously hindered. At the submission stage, a lack of clarity makes it more difficult for reviewers to fully identify and understand a paper's merits—injecting noise into reviewers' judgments. Obtaining "friendly reviews" from colleagues, both in and out of one's research domain, is often a vital step to improving a paper's clarity. Whatever the steps involved, it is critical that authors attend not just to what their ideas are, but also to how their ideas are presented within the confines of their manuscripts.

Technical Adequacy

Many of the most critical issues reviewers raise are associated with methods sections. "Technical adequacy" captures the acceptability of a study's methodological execution. If the manuscript represents a hypothetico-deductive approach, do its manipulations or measures have construct validity? Does its study design address key unmeasured confounds and use procedural remedies for potential common method bias? Is the statistical power of the analysis adequate, and are levels of analysis and nonindependence issues properly addressed?

If a manuscript represents an inductive approach—using data to generate theory through inductive reasoning (e.g., grounded theory, ethnography, and theory building from cases)—technical adequacy depends on whether the data were gathered, coded, and interpreted according to prevailing standards. Regardless of the methods involved, *AMJ*'s "Information for Contributors" section advises authors to obtain friendly reviews on their methodological choices before their data are collected, with the intention of preventing unforeseen mistakes from turning into fatal flaws.

Theoretical Contribution

To the extent that *AMJ* has a "brand," emphasis on a *strong theoretical contribution* is certainly a signature element of that brand. Some support for this assertion is found in *AMJ*'s mission statement, which stresses the testing, extending, or building of management theory. Additional support can be seen in the number of past "From the Editors" columns that have touched on issues of theory (e.g., Eden, 2002; Bergh, 2003; Northcraft, 2000; Rynes, 2002; Schminke, 2004; Tsui, 1999). The *Journal*'s discussion of what constitutes a theoretical contribution has evolved over time (Colquitt et al., 2007). The current version of *AMJ*'s "Information for Contributors" describes a number of avenues for generating new implications or insights for management theory. Some examples include the first empirical test of a new theory (for example, theoretical ideas offered in a recently published *Academy of Management Review* article); constructive replication that clarifies and extends the boundaries of an existing theory; study that uses meta-analytic relationships to test theory; and work that builds theory using inductive methods. These examples underscore the fact that there are several paths for authors to take to make a theoretical contribution. The path selected is a function of the scholar's research question and the current state of the literatures within which s/he is working.

Empirical Contribution

A study's empirical contribution reflects the degree to which its findings add valid knowledge to the existing pool of knowledge in the relevant research domain(s). The strength of the reported findings plays a role here in that studies with models that explain high or significant amounts of variance are viewed quite favorably with respect to this criterion. The "valid" qualifier illustrates that this evaluation criterion depends to a large degree on an earlier criterion: technical adequacy. If a study lacks construct validity, internal validity, statistical power, and so forth, it cannot contribute meaningful knowledge. Indeed, such a study could become an obstacle to the accumulation of knowledge by triggering unproductive follow-ups or clouding the results of meta-analyses. Aside from technical adequacy, the magnitude of a study's empirical contribution depends on how its results fit into the larger fabric of the relevant literature. For example, all else being equal, the 3rd study within a given research stream will represent a more substantial empirical contribution than the 13th study.

Interestingness, Innovativeness, and Novelty

Although the sixth criterion on the reviewer evaluation form is one of the most subjective, it is also one that *AMJ* has emphasized to an increasing degree over time. Beyer (1985) was perhaps the first to explicitly call for more interesting submissions to the *Journal*. Rynes (2005) reiterated Beyer's call, and Bartunek, Rynes, and Ireland (2006) expanded the discussion about *AMJ*'s desire to publish *interesting* research. In part, Bartunek et al.'s evaluation of this matter was based on the results of a survey of the then-current editorial review board. The survey was conducted to gain board members' insights into what makes management research interesting and *why* interesting research matters to scholars and journals. Davis observed that "the first criterion by which people judge anything they encounter, even before deciding whether it is true or false, is whether it is interesting or boring" (1999: 245), and in some ways that observation is the foundation for *AMJ*'s desire to publish interesting research and to better understand the characteristics of interesting scholarship.

To many reviewers, theory-building articles will be most interesting and innovative, because they often examine new constructs, relationships, or processes. Other reviewers, however, may see interestingness in an unconventional yet elegant way of testing existing theory. We suspect that many reviewers react to this criterion in a way that echoes Justice Potter Stewart's famous line—namely, "They know it when they see it." Steve Barley used musical taste as an analogy when he stated, "Academic papers are a bit like rock and roll bands: whether an audience finds them interesting is a matter of perspective, if not taste" (2006: 16).

Potential Implications for Practice

AMJ's mission calls for publishing articles that contribute to both management theory and management practice. Evaluating this criterion depends in part on the quality of the practical implications section in a paper's discussion section. Authors are encouraged to give this section a great deal of thought and care and to view the effectiveness and feasibility of their implications from an organization's perspective. Of course, evaluating this criterion also depends in part on the research question, as some relationships or processes have more apparent implications for practice than others. For research questions whose implications for practice are less obvious, scholars are challenged to "dig deeper" to find ways their work can contribute to managerial practice.

Significance of Contribution

The evaluation criteria appearing on *AMJ*'s reviewer evaluation form also include two general items that ask reviewers for an overall assessment of an article: potential significance of contribution and magnitude of contribution relative to length. The latter criterion then feeds into a supplementary section that can be used to offer authors feedback on trimming their manuscripts as a path to developing a more parsimonious presentation for readers. The placement of these last two items is not arbitrary, as overall judgments about the significance of a paper's contribution obviously depend on the criteria reviewed above. Manuscripts that offer significant empirical contributions and significant theoretical contributions are more likely to be highly rated in an overall significance sense; and clarity of exposition plays a large role in balancing contribution with length.

Summary

We hope the discussion in this "From the Editors" creates value and resolves mystery by clarifying the nine criteria on which *AMJ* submissions are judged. Of course, the evaluation form also asks reviewers to offer the action editor their bottom-line recommendation ("reject," "doubtful," "promising but needs major revision," "accept with minor revision," or "accept"). One could conceive of a very interesting policy-capturing study in which that overall recommendation was regressed on the nine criteria with the purpose of determining which had the most impact on reviewers' judgments. However, our sense is that reviewers must be free to use their own weighting schemes when making their recommendations. Some reviewers may weigh theoretical contribution and interestingness above all else; others might prioritize technical adequacy and empirical contribution; and still others might use a completely different model. That is as it should be, particularly given that different academic literatures possess very different strengths and needs.

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