

FROM THE EDITORS

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DEVELOPMENTAL ACTION EDITOR

Because of their critical importance to an effective review process, *AMJ* provides a fair amount of guidance on the topic of writing developmental reviews.¹ The Academy of Management annual meetings also offer regular Professional Development Workshops (PDWs) devoted to the craft of reviewing. There is perhaps more mystery about the process of writing editorial decision letters. Because we view decision letters as another very important part of *AMJ*'s reviewing process, the purpose of this commentary is to describe the objectives and steps involved in writing decision letters for *AMJ*. For convenience, I will use the terms "associate editor" ("AE") and "editor" interchangeably. Both refer here to the role of *action editor*—the person with the responsibility to write the decision letter for an individual paper that has been submitted to *AMJ* for publication consideration.

AMJ strives to provide developmental feedback to authors. This feedback comes in the form of peer reviews and an AE's decision letter. Consequently, developmental decision letters begin with high-quality reviews. My colleagues and I are indebted to the dedicated editorial review board members and ad hoc reviewers who provide these reviews. But, beyond this, what do we hope to achieve with our decision letters at *AMJ*? Let's begin with the end in mind: we aim to publish manuscripts that make a "significant contribution to empirical knowledge and theory in management."²

This journal's standing in the field and ability to make a contribution to management research depend on our ability to attract the best empirical scholarship. Academic journals in the field of management, like the organizations we study, do not exist in a vacuum. There is a competitive marketplace for ideas, and many high-quality empirical journals might be suitable outlets for the work management scholars seek to publish. Other journals hope to attract the same manuscripts we seek. One

competitive advantage *AMJ* has is that it is the management journal with the largest and widest readership. But this is a legacy advantage, one that the current editorial team seeks to enhance by proactively managing the submission and review process. The governing board of *AMJ* decided long ago that the *Journal* would couple its size advantage with the provision of timely and developmental reviews. For some time now, *AMJ*'s editorial teams have added to this the objective of delivering reviews with a supportive tone (the "Guidelines" refer to these as "friendly reviews"). Thus, this commentary addresses how we aim to provide decision letters that are timely, developmental, and supportive.

Timeliness

We take deadlines for returning reviews and decision letters seriously at *AMJ*. The realities of academic careers mean that many submitting authors have tenure and promotion decisions tied to their scholarship during set periods of time. Some journals are notorious for being "black holes" for manuscripts. I'm proud to be associated with a journal that is so considerate of the career realities facing most authors.

We aim for a 60-day average turnaround. Of course, some manuscripts exceed this desired turnaround, but in the great majority of cases we meet this target. When we fail, it is usually due to an unanticipated delay from one of the reviewers, scheduling conflicts, and the lumpy nature of the manuscript flow. However, on average we do hit this target, meaning that it is a very rare event when a manuscript's decision letter is delayed significantly. Currently, for example, we are averaging just less than 58 days from the receipt of a paper to the sending of a decision letter (this average is quite a bit lower when "desk reject" letters are included in the calculation).

You might be interested to know that although we actively monitor the timeliness of reviews and decision letters, as editors we are very forgiving of authors who need extra time to return revised manuscripts. Invited revisions are initially given a window of four months. However, sometimes revisions require additional data, and sometimes an author faces a family, health, or work conflict that

I thank Duane Ireland for helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ http://journals.aomonline.org/amj/reviewer_guidelines.html.

² *Ibid.*

makes this deadline problematic. Here we are flexible. Our primary objective is to publish the highest-quality empirical research. Obviously, there are limits to how long a revision can be delayed. But your action editor will be happy to work with you when the need arises.

Developmental

Writing a developmental decision letter is much easier when the reviews themselves are developmental. But what can an editor specifically do to add value to the review process? I think it might be easiest to start with a counter example. My belief is that an editor provides no independent developmental feedback when s/he simply communicates the vote of the reviewers and bases her/his decision on this simple tally of recommendations. My experience as an author suggests that the “vote-counting” approach is not as uncommon as scholars want it to be, even among high-quality journals. Many of us have manuscript horror stories, and one of mine involves a decision letter I received that only had one reviewer letter and a three-sentence letter from the editor. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I note that this experience did *not* occur at *AMJ*.)

Our objective at *AMJ* is to provide value to authors through the review process. Stated succinctly, we aim to have reviews and decision letters that are *specific*, *constructive*, and *valid*. We would hope that reviews not only point out the weaknesses of a manuscript, but also identify strengths. As I make decisions on manuscripts, some of the questions I ask myself include:

- What can the authors work with as they move forward?
- Is the basic idea or research question interesting, even if the theory is not fully developed?
- Are aspects of the empirical method done well, even if there are problems with measures or models?
- Are the data interesting, novel, or rich enough that special consideration is warranted?

Perhaps, given the nature of academic training and socialization, following up on those questions about a manuscript's strengths is more difficult than pointing out its deficiencies (Starbuck, 2003). Certainly, authors need to be alerted to what is seriously deficient in a manuscript. But it is also important to identify the elements in the theory and study that can be preserved and worked with as the authors move forward. A developmental editor (and a developmental reviewer, for that matter) is on the lookout for manuscripts that might be

“diamonds in the rough.” I can still recall a lesson I learned in a research methods seminar taught by David Schkade. After honing our skills for finding problems and flaws, he challenged us to develop a different set of skills. He said he had been deeply impressed by the wisdom of Jan Beyer, a former *AMJ* editor, who emphasized that sometimes the theory presented in a submission is weak, but its data and findings are incredibly rich, novel, and important. In such cases, she told him, the challenge for the reviewer and editor is to find a way to “save the data.” My most rewarding experiences at *AMJ* have involved cases in which the reviewers and the action editor identified one of these potential gems and helped the authors develop the manuscript into a meaningful contribution that was later published in *AMJ*.

Each editorial decision is based on the editor's own review of the manuscript and reviewer feedback. Reviewers often identify different strengths and weaknesses in manuscripts. The comprehensiveness and quality of the reviews might vary. Furthermore, reviewers' first-round recommendations usually reveal disagreement regarding a manuscript's potential contribution (Miller, 2006). Whether the recommendations are similar or not, the editor decides whether the manuscript gets a second chance. We are not vote counters; reviewers inform our decisions but do not dictate those decisions (Rynes et al., 2005). A developmental attitude requires an element of optimism when evaluating manuscripts potential through the lens of peer review. We sift through the noisy signals from reviewers, attempt to find the potential in manuscripts (not just the flaws), and come to some reasoned forecast of which manuscripts *might* be improved sufficiently through revision to make interesting and significant contributions.

To be developmental, a decision letter must go beyond communicating the decision. Particularly when an invitation for revision is extended, the editor's role requires that she or he analyze, evaluate, and synthesize the reviewers' feedback and then draw attention to what is most important. The AE must formulate a basic outline for a revision plan that will address the most serious weaknesses and further develop the manuscript in a manner appropriate for *AMJ*. This often involves trade-offs. Not everything requested by reviewers can be done; some requests are at odds with others, some suggestions might take the manuscript in the wrong direction. Individual reviewers only have their unique perspective; the editor has the benefit of multiple perspectives and must use this feedback and his or her own evaluation to guide authors. Thus, at *AMJ* an AE helps an author identify the

most serious issues and identify possible solutions to the issues raised in the reviews.

As scholars, we likely agree that creating and disseminating knowledge involves an interdependent value chain. The action editor's role is not just that of gatekeeper. In providing this quality assurance, the review process should add value to authors and their scholarship.

Supportive

Permit me to segue to my final issue—providing friendly, supportive reviews and decision letters—by sharing another early imprinting experience. A colleague once shared some sage advice he learned from his mentor. It was this: “To succeed in this profession it takes a thick skin and the will to persevere.”³ We often put years of hard work into writing a manuscript. It (hopefully) represents our best efforts at the time. Our scholarly identities and reputations are largely determined by these outcomes. Furthermore, we are often (we think) among the foremost experts in our specific areas of research, and we tend to really value the opportunity to have our work published in an outlet like *AMJ*. Yet in one fateful letter containing a few anonymous reviews we sometimes discover we apparently don't know as much as we thought we did and that our work does not measure up to standards. How surprising it is to read that apparently we don't know the literature all that well and that we fail to understand how to conduct empirical research!

This reflection brings me to my last point: *AMJ* strives to provide author-friendly reviews. This means that we hope that the tone of reviews and decision letters is professional and friendly, even if highly critical. We want to be tough on issues, not on authors. Thankfully, most reviewers at *AMJ* are

very professional and supportive, even when communicating concerns and reservations.

In summary, *AMJ*'s editorial team intends to have the review process be a mark of distinction. Developmental reviews not only give *AMJ* an advantage in attracting high-quality manuscripts; these reviews also increase the probability that high-quality research will be molded into strong contributions to the theory and practice of management.

As an editorial team, we are steadfastly committed to doing everything we can to support your efforts to publish your best work in *AMJ*. We recognize that you are entrusting us with work in which you take a great deal of pride. We respect each author's decision to submit her or his work to the *Journal*. We are not able to provide all authors with the editorial decisions they seek; however, we can and do continuously strive to provide all authors with a positive reviewing experience when they submit their work to the *Academy of Management Journal*. For us, this positive reviewing experience includes a timely, developmental, and supportive decision letter as well as reviews that share these characteristics.

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³ The original source of this advice was Don Hambrick, and it was passed on to me by Jim Fredrickson.

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