EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Retrospection: The MIS Quarterly's Review Processes: 1995-2001

This past March and April, the *MIS Quarterly's* Senior Editors engaged in an examination of the review processes that we use. As always, our goal was to determine whether we could improve their quality. Administrative staff at the *MIS Quarterly's* office at the University of Minnesota kindly extracted detailed data about our reviews from the Web pages we have maintained and archived for the years 1995 though 2001. We then analyzed this data in various ways to try to get an overall perspective about our review processes.

Table 1 shows some of the key figures that we extracted from the detailed data. In this editorial, I'd like to comment on these figures in the hope that they assist your understanding of the *MIS Quarterly* and thus lead to better outcomes if you submit your papers to us.

Yearly Workload

Over the seven-year period, the Senior Editors made decisions on 236 manuscripts each year. On average, 162 decisions related to new manuscripts that had been submitted, and 74 decisions related to revised manuscripts that had been submitted.

It is interesting to consider the workload implications associated with the yearly flow of manuscripts. If we assume that each manuscript has one Senior Editor, one Associate Editor, and three Reviewers (this review team is typical) and that each member of the review team spends one day discharging their duties, the average yearly workload is 1,180 days (236 × 5), or about 3.23 years if we assume no weekends off and no vacation days, or about 4.91 years if we assume weekends off and four weeks of vacation. Members of our review teams come from around the world, so it is somewhat difficult to estimate the average annual compensation for our Editors and Reviewers. Let's assume, however, that the average annual compensation is $100,000 U.S. (taking into account fringe benefits, etc.). If we take 4.91 years as the average yearly reviewing workload, the opportunity cost of our reviewing operations is about $490,000 U.S. per year.

From another perspective, we currently have nine Senior Editors and 30 Associate Editors. Assuming the workload is equally distributed, on average each Senior Editor makes about 26 decisions on manuscripts each year (one every two weeks), and each Associate Editor makes about eight recommendations on manuscripts each year (about one every six weeks).

From still another perspective, let's assume that the *MIS Quarterly* publishes about 20 papers per year (four issues with five papers per issue). If we take the figure of $490,000 U.S. as our cost of reviewing, we have to "invest" $24,500 in reviewing before we obtain a publishable paper.

The above costs do not take into account the administrative costs associated with the *MIS Quarterly*—for instance, maintaining a record on the status of each manuscript, keeping Web pages up to date, preparing manuscripts for publication, processing subscriptions, and printing and distributing the journal.

Table 1. Some Summary Review Statistics for the *MIS Quarterly*: 1995–2001	
Statistic	**Value**
Average number of papers on which decisions were made each year	236
Average number of papers on which final disposition decisions were made each year	122
Average acceptance rate based on final disposition decision	13.6%
Average number of revisions required before acceptance	2.66
Average percentage of rejected papers rejected after first review	82%
Average percentage of rejected papers rejected after second review	13%
Average percentage of rejected papers rejected after third review	4%
Average review turnaround time for first review round	67 days SD = 67 days
Average review turnaround time for second review round	89 days SD = 63 days
Average review turnaround time for third review round	74 days SD = 63 days

At this point you may be feeling that the perverse economist in me has been allowed to run amok. I believe the above figures are important, however, because as scholars we need to have an understanding of some of the significant costs associated with running a major journal. From one perspective, when we submit a paper to a journal we need to appreciate that we engage some costly processes. Thus, submissions should not be undertaken lightly. From another perspective, editors like myself need to care about the impact that the journal for which they are responsible is having on their discipline. If a journal's impact is low, how can the costs of running a journal be justified? As I indicated in my March 2002 Editorial Statement, currently the *MIS Quarterly* enjoys a high impact rating (see, e.g., Bill Starbuck's journal rankings at http://www.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/). It would be foolhardy, however, if we rested on our laurels. We must seek ways to continually improve the *MIS Quarterly* and our field as a whole.

Some Acceptance Statistics

During the period 1995 through 2001, an average of 122 final disposition decisions were made each year. By a final disposition decision, I mean a manuscript was either accepted or rejected. Recall that on average the total number of decisions made each year was 236. The difference (236 – 122 = 114) is the average number of "revise" decisions made each year.

We accepted 13.6% of all manuscripts on which we made a final disposition decision during the seven-year period. Interestingly, in some years the acceptance rate swung markedly: 6% in one year, and 23% in another year.

As an editor, I have been slow to realize an "obvious" consequence of the above statistics. If our goal is to publish 20 papers per year and we have an acceptance rate of 13.6%, we need to be making final

disposition decisions on 147 manuscripts per year. Only slight changes in submission rates or acceptance rates can have a marked effect on the number of papers available for publication in the journal and ultimately the viability of the journal.

Perhaps you might feel that this is my problem as editor, especially if you have been the "victim" of a review process at the *MIS Quarterly* that you perceive has been unduly harsh. On the one hand, you are right. It *is* my responsibility to try to balance quality objectives, acceptance rates, and submission rates so the *MIS Quarterly* survives and prospers. On the other hand, I would argue it is our *collective* responsibility as scholars in the information systems discipline to ensure our major journals survive. As authors, we need to take care that we prepare manuscripts that meet reasonable quality standards. As reviewers, we need to take care that the standards we impose on our colleagues' papers are reasonable.

On average, manuscripts went through 2.66 revisions before they were accepted. I suspect this figure is fairly typical for major journals. Nonetheless, the Senior Editors and I have been reflecting carefully on this statistic. Why does it take authors roughly three attempts before they achieve an acceptance decision? Are papers being submitted in a relatively poor state in the first place? Is the review team not clearly communicating their concerns to authors? Are authors not attending carefully to the review team's concerns when they prepare revisions? Are members of the review team unreasonably shifting their stance on the revisions needed as they evaluate a new version of the paper?

In the case of the *MIS Quarterly*, I suspect that a major reason for requiring nearly three revisions before a paper is published relates to the significant *development* work that the review team undertakes with the author. In this regard, I have had a number of authors indicate to me that the quality of their papers improved significantly as they tried to respond to the *MIS Quarterly* review team's concerns. Nonetheless, we can over-engineer papers. Occasionally I read papers in journals that blatantly reflect the poor authors have had to accommodate reviewer concerns to the point where the overall quality of their paper has been undermined and not enhanced. Moreover, I suspect we can always improve the quality of a paper in some way if we continue to work on it. At some point we must stop and permit the paper to see the light of day as a published paper. I have also come to appreciate that one colleague's perceptions of quality are not always another colleague's perceptions of quality. As members of a review team, we have to be careful that our idiosyncratic perceptions of quality are not pressed unreasonably on our colleagues. Otherwise, we run the risk that authors will become frustrated and exhausted with the revision process such that (1) they no longer continue with the revision process, and/or (2) the journal's reputation begins to suffer.

Over time, I hope we can find ways to reduce the number of revisions needed before papers are finally accepted in the *MIS Quarterly*. In this regard, I would like more of the developmental work required on a paper to be done *before* the paper is submitted to the *MIS Quarterly* (see my comments below). The outcome, then, would be faster publication of high-quality papers once they are submitted to the *MIS Quarterly*.

Some Rejection Statistics

If we accepted 13.6% of all manuscripts on which we made a final disposition decision during the seven-year period, then clearly we rejected 86.4% of papers on which we made a final disposition decision. In terms of the set of rejected papers, 82% were rejected after the first round of reviews, 13% were rejected after the second round of reviews, 4% were rejected after the third round of reviews, and the remaining 1% were rejected after the fourth round of reviews.

These statistics show some "good news" and "bad news." The good news is that the invitation to revise a paper for the *MIS Quarterly* indicates authors have a reasonable chance of ultimately having their paper accepted. If you receive an invitation to revise and resubmit a paper that you have submitted to the *MIS Quarterly*, therefore, it is important to commit wholeheartedly to undertaking the revisions. Providing you undertake high-quality revisions, your chances of having your paper ultimately published in the *MIS Quarterly* are good, although clearly there are no certainties. It is disappointing, therefore, when authors fail to revise and resubmit their papers when they have been so invited. Aside from the review time that has been "wasted," authors give up an outstanding opportunity to have their paper possibly appear in a major journal. The message is clear. If you receive an invitation from the *MIS Quarterly* to revise and resubmit your paper, do not procrastinate! Commit to undertaking a high-quality revision, and commit to resubmitting your paper on a timely basis.

The bad news is that the rejection rate on the first round of reviews is high (86.4%). Although some view high rejection rates as the sign of a high-quality journal, please let me be clear on how I view this issue. I do *not* regard the *MIS Quarterly's* high rejection rate as its signal mark of quality. Rather, I want the quality of the *MIS Quarterly* to be judged on the basis of the quality of and impact of the papers we publish and the level of service we provide to our authors. Ideally, we would have the best-quality papers in the discipline being submitted to us, and we would accept a high percentage of these papers.

To be forthright, I am troubled by the *MIS Quarterly's* high rejection rate and, in particular, the high rejection rate after the first round of reviews. What is happening? Supposedly our discipline is maturing. We ought to have more researchers doing better research, and overall we ought to be generating more high-quality research. For instance, surely our freshly minted Ph.D. graduates are better trained as researchers now than many of us were, say, 20 years ago. Moreover, with advances in information technology, all of us ought to be capable of doing better, faster research. For instance, consider the support now provided by software for both qualitative and quantitative research versus the support provided, say, 20 years ago.

Is the problem centered on the *MIS Quarterly's* review processes? Have our review teams become too demanding? Are we expecting a level of quality in papers that few researchers can attain? Are we so demanding with our revision processes that we exhaust authors to the point where they give up on us in despair? In our reflections on this issue, one of the Senior Editors voiced a concern that we might be seeing evidence of a "vicious cycle." As the *MIS Quarterly's* reputation has grown, the demands our review-team members place upon authors for quality have also grown. This, in turn, feeds back into the journal's reputation for quality, which then affects reviewer expectations, and so the cycle goes on. As a prospective author, please be assured that the Senior Editors at the *MIS Quarterly* are currently reflecting long and hard on this issue to determine whether we have work to do.

On the other hand, our high rejection rate, especially after the first round of reviews, might indeed be a manifestation of the state of the quality of research that we are undertaking within our discipline. Perhaps we are more mature in terms of our training in research methods and research tools. But are we better trained in teasing out and articulating the fundamental questions that underlie our discipline—questions that transcend the specific information technologies and their impacts that we so often study? Are we still a discipline that falls too easily into the trap of studying phenomena because they are trendy and bathed in the glory of hyperbole rather than manifesting substantive, fundamental issues? My perception is that increasingly we see papers rejected not because they have flawed research methods or analyses but because their contributions are insufficient. We have too much "dustbowl empiricism." As Allen Lee has so eloquently argued (Editorial Statements, *MIS Quarterly*, September 1999 and March 2000), those papers published in the *MIS Quarterly* that have received high acclaim have all addressed questions and obtained conclusions that have stood the test of time. The questions they asked and the conclusions they obtained are as relevant now as they were when the papers were first published.

Too often, the *MIS Quarterly* also receives papers that have not been refined adequately. In the excitement of finishing a paper and the anticipation of getting a first or yet another publication, too many authors send papers to the *MIS Quarterly* that are "hot off the press." The research described in these papers might be high in quality, but the papers themselves are often poorly written.

For many years, I have mixed on a day-to-day basis with colleagues in the finance and accounting disciplines. I have also participated in their publication processes as an author and a reviewer. In these disciplines, my colleagues understand and accept the need to "workshop" their papers *before* they submit them to the best journals in their discipline. Their papers often go through multiple iterations prior to an initial submission. In the case of one accounting journal with which I had dealings, the Editor stated outright that he would not send a paper out for review unless he saw evidence that the paper had been "workshopped." In particular, he indicated that the acknowledgements paragraph on a paper had to show that the authors had already obtained feedback and refined their paper before submitting it to the journal for which he was responsible. Perhaps the position taken by the Editor seems extreme, but it was congruent with the beliefs held by many of his senior colleagues.

In this light, I reiterate the point I made in my March 2002 Editorial Statement in the *MIS Quarterly*. Increasingly, the Senior Editors will have an expectation that authors who submit their papers to the *MIS Quarterly* will have obtained feedback from colleagues and refined their papers *before* they submit their papers to us. We want to increase our acceptance rate. Perhaps more importantly, we want to assist our colleagues to publish their best research. Our ability to fulfil this role is severely undermined, however, when we receive papers that have not been adequately refined before submission. Review-team members are fast to reject papers when they face the prospect of having to undertake large amounts of work, some of which might be high-risk, before a paper is likely to be in a publishable state.

In short, the *MIS Quarterly's* high rejection rate is causing us to reflect long and hard about our review processes. As a discipline, however, I believe we also need to reflect long and hard on the protocols we follow before we submit papers to our major journals. Again, our goal at the *MIS Quarterly* is to publish papers, not to reject them!

Review Turnaround Times

During the period 1995 through 2001, the *MIS Quarterly's* average review turnaround time for the first version of a submitted manuscript was 67 days. For the second version (first revision), it was 89 days; and for the third version (second revision), it was 74 days. For subsequent versions, the average review turnaround time dropped sharply, presumably because the manuscript was close to acceptance.

If feedback from my colleagues is a reliable indicator, the review turnaround time provided by review teams at the *MIS Quarterly* is good. I hear horror stories where reviews have taken in excess of 12 months. Sometimes the reviews have then been provided only because the authors have harassed the journal editor.

Interestingly, few journals seem willing to divulge their review turnaround times. Two with which I am familiar that do, however, are the *Journal of Accounting and Economics* and the *Journal of Financial Economics*. Both are A-level journals in their fields with similar rejection rates to the *MIS Quarterly*. The former has a median review turnaround time of around 53 days. The latter has a median review turnaround time of around 35 days. The former has a stated policy of returning reviews to authors within seven weeks. The latter has a stated policy of returning reviews to authors within six weeks. Both charge submission fees, which they use to pay their reviewers providing the review is returned on a timely basis.

One of my goals as editor of the *MIS Quarterly* is to reduce our median turnaround time without compromising the quality of our reviews. I would like to see us return reviews to authors within a six to seven week time frame. A concern I have currently is that the standard deviations associated with our review turnaround times are relatively large. For instance, for the first version of the manuscript it is 67 days, and for the second and third versions it is 63 days. In other words, there is a fairly high variance around the mean in terms of the review turnaround times we provide. Clearly, also, the distribution of review turnaround times is right-skewed. Ideally, we would have a somewhat stable mean/median with a small standard deviation. I have asked the Senior Editors and the Associate Editors at the *MIS Quarterly* to commit to working toward achieving this goal.

Brickbats and Bouquets

Please let me be clear on one issue. As an author of a paper that you have submitted to the *MIS Quarterly*, you have a right to complain if you believe your paper is not being handled appropriately (e.g, it is not being reviewed expeditiously, or you believe after careful reflection that the reviews are poor in quality). We ask, however, that you voice your complaint in a professional way. In the first instance, the complaint should be taken up with the Senior Editor handling your paper. If it is not resolved to your satisfaction, you should then take it up with me. If I am the culprit and you cannot get satisfaction from me, for the moment you should then take your complaint up with the Publisher (currently Gordon Davis). In the longer term, we are evaluating whether we should put in place some type of board to which the Editor-in-Chief is responsible. Concerns about the Editor-in-Chief could then be directed to the Chair of this Board.

The *MIS Quarterly* is a large, fairly complex operation. We rely on the goodwill of many colleagues for our activities to work effectively and efficiently. From time to time, we make mistakes. Occasionally, we do not notice a mistake—for instance, a manuscript "slips through the cracks." When things go awry with a manuscript, I have noticed to my chagrin that not just one thing goes wrong but multiple things then have the habit of going wrong. In short, Murphy's Law prevails. Please be understanding of (hopefully) the occasional problem you encounter with us, but also please help us by giving feedback when a problem occurs. Do not assume that we ought to know about the problem. We might, but then again we might not.

On the other hand, if you are pleased with our review processes, we would also welcome your positive feedback. Our staff, editors, and reviewers always appreciate hearing about a job well done. In academe, positive feedback is all to rare.

Reviewer of the Year for 2001

I am pleased to announce that the *MIS Quarterly's* Reviewer of the Year for 2001 is Sue Brown of Indiana University. Sue has been a frequent Reviewer for the *MIS Quarterly*, and Senior Editors and Associate Editors alike have regarded her reviews as outstanding. On behalf of the *MIS Quarterly*, I would like to extend to Sue our congratulations on her achievement.

Best-Paper Award for 2001

I am also pleased to announce that the *MIS Quarterly's* Best-Paper Award for 2001 goes to Dov Te'eni for his paper, "*Review*: A Cognitive-Affective Model of Organizational Communication for Designing IT," which appeared in the June 2001 issue of the *MIS Quarterly*. Nominations for the best-paper award are made

by the Associate Editors of the *MIS Quarterly*. A short-list is then considered by the Senior Editors of the *MIS Quarterly* and the winner chosen from this short-list. On behalf of the *MIS Quarterly*, I would like to extend to Dov our congratulations on his achieving this award and our thanks for his support of the *MIS Quarterly*.

MISQ Executive

I am pleased to announce that the first issue of *MISQ Executive* will soon be published. *MISQ Executive* is targeting two audiences: information systems practitioners and information systems academics. For practitioners, it seeks to provide immediately useful, readable research. For academics, the academically recognizable quality of the practitioner-oriented research and the *MISQ* branding of the journal are intended, eventually, to make such research rewardable in the tenure-and-promotion system. It is also believed that these articles will be useful in the classroom for pragmatically minded MBA students. Furthermore, *MISQ Executive* articles will provide examples of how high-quality academic research can be crafted as papers accessible to a practitioner audience.

I would like to thank the following colleagues for their major efforts in bringing *MISQ Executive* to fruition: Cynthia Beath, Alan Dennis, Robert Fuller, Allen Lee, Jack Rockart, Jeanne Ross, and Michael Vitale. In particular, I would also like to thank Indiana University for its generous financial support that has made possible the establishment and publication of *MISQ Executive*.

Guest Editorial on *MISQ Review*

Following this editorial statement is a guest editorial statement prepared by Jane Webster and Rick Watson. Jane is the current Senior Editor of *MISQ Review*. Rick was the previous Senior Editor (and inaugural Senior Editor) of *MISQ Review*. The *MISQ Review* was Rick's brainchild.

In their editorial, Jane and Rick provide excellent advice on how to prepare a review paper. I whole-heartedly commend their editorial to you for careful reading. I commend it especially to doctoral students who are preparing their theses. Good review papers are critical to the development of a discipline, and they are sadly lacking in the information systems discipline. At the *MIS Quarterly* we are committed to assisting colleagues to develop and publish review papers. Our goal is to be a major publication forum for the highest-quality review papers in the information systems discipline that are congruent with our overall mission. Jane and Rick provide an important service to colleagues in assisting us to accomplish this goal.

Ron Weber
Editor-in-Chief