EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Submitting a Manuscript for Publication: Some Advice and an Insider's View

With help from the senior editors, I recently wrote up a set of notes to share with the associate editors regarding the current form of the review process at *MIS Quarterly*. It also makes sense to write up a corresponding set of notes for prospective authors. Some parts of the notes offer instructions and advice to prospective authors; other parts offer an "insider's view" of the review process at the *Quarterly*.

Step 1: Targeting a Manuscript for the Quarterly

An author should already be targeting one or another journal when writing up the results of his or her research in the form of an article and perhaps even before doing the research itself. Typically, a journal welcomes some types of research, but not others, and prefers certain writing and formatting styles over others. Whenever prospective authors say to me, "I have just finished writing up a paper—do you think I could send it to the *Quarterly*?," I wonder about the additional time and effort they would need to spend to retrofit their paper to the *Quarterly*. If they fail to do this, they would increase the risk of their manuscript's being immediately screened out of the review process or eventually ending up with "reject" recommendations from the reviewers.

A prospective author can learn more about the different types of research that the *Quarterly* welcomes by examining not only past *Quarterly* articles, but also the "Editor's Comments" that appear in every issue. For instance, editor's comments have covered "Topics Addressed in *MIS Quarterly*" (June 1995), "What Not to Submit to the *MIS Quarterly*" (December 1995), descriptions of "the nature of the criteria likely to be used by editors and reviewers in their consideration of a submitted manuscript" (December 1996), and detailed descriptions of "*MIS Quarterly* Departments, *MISQ Discovery*, and *MISQ Review*" (March 1999). (The different departments of the *Quarterly* are Research Articles, Issues and Opinions, Research Notes, and Research Essays.) The site index on the *Quarterly*'s web site (http://www.misq.org) has direct links to these and other editor's comments.

When preparing a manuscript for possible publication in *MIS Quarterly*, an author can take advantage of knowledge of the membership of the editorial board. This advice pertains to the preparation of a paper for submission to any journal, but it applies especially to the preparation of a submission to the *Quarterly*, where an author may nominate members of the current editorial board to serve as the senior and associate editors for his or her manuscript. Knowing an editor's reputation for being interested in certain fields of research can influence how an author writes up his or her manuscript.

An author should always ask one or more trusted colleagues to examine his or her manuscript before submitting it to a journal. More than once, I have received submissions that do not fit any of the departments of the *Quarterly* or that make an unconventional argument without adequately preparing the reader for it, as if logic alone could overcome the reality of reviewer reactions. (I learned, from my experience as

a qualitative researcher in the early 1980s, that logic alone is often insufficient to win the understanding and support of reviewers, editors, and program chairs.) In one such case, I telephoned the author and learned that he had a freshly minted Ph.D. and that his dissertation committee members had been decision science/management science professors who claimed to be information systems researchers even though they had not published information systems research. I told him: "If the first people to read your manuscript, apart from yourself, are the reviewers and editor at the journal where you are sending it, then you are, in effect, using the reviewers and editors to 'beta test' your manuscript. Shouldn't you 'beta test' your manuscript *before* you send it to the *Quarterly*?" He agreed to send his manuscript, as a working paper, to some trusted colleagues for their comments and even to ask them if he could present his paper at research seminars at their institutions. In general, a prospective *Quarterly* author might ask colleagues the following: "Do you think this manuscript is written in a style that would make sense to the reviewers at *MIS Quarterly*?" and "Apart from how the manuscript presents the research, do you think the underlying research is something that *MIS Quarterly* would be interested in?" An author should address the same concerns for any journal to which he or she wishes to submit a manuscript.

Step 2: Submitting the Manuscript to the Quarterly

I find it surprising that many authors still do not take advantage of the *Quarterly*'s policy that allows an author to offer nominations for senior editor (SE), associate editor (AE), and reviewers. Sometimes I say in an e-mail to such an author: "Do you mean to say that not a single person on the AE board is qualified to handle your manuscript?" and "Do you mean to say that you are giving up the opportunity to recommend a competent scholar to be a reviewer for your manuscript?" Along the same lines, many authors still do not specify the department in which they would like their manuscript to be considered (i.e., research articles, issues and opinions, research essays, research notes). Moreover, an author should determine the department prior to writing up the paper for the *Quarterly*; a successful strategy does not involve first writing up a paper and then subsequently asking the editor to decide if it is a research note or an issues and opinions submission. To help expedite this matter, the *Quarterly* web site offers a sample cover letter/e-mail. An author should send a word-processing file of the manuscript in the form of an attachment to the cover e-mail. The web site at http://www.misq.org has a link to "Submitting a Manuscript," which contains additional submission instructions and guidelines.

Step 3: Screening the Manuscript

A senior editor is responsible for the final decision on a submission ("not appropriate for *MIS Quarterly*," "accept," "reject"). Every SE exercises autonomy in his or her handling of a particular manuscript. The editor-in-chief (myself) has the option of functioning as an SE in handling and making a decision on a manuscript, but does not review any other SE's handling of or decision on a manuscript. Every SE's decision is final. Because the final responsibility for a manuscript rests with the SE, every SE is generally quite scrupulous in screening a manuscript and suggesting ways to improve its worthiness for review, especially when subsequent steps in the review process would require extensive work from the SE, the AE, and the reviewers.

The first criterion that an SE considers in screening a submitted manuscript is whether it fits the *Quarterly's* editorial policy ("Is this manuscript really about the management of information technology or the use of information technology for managerial and organizational purposes?"). With regard to screening the manuscript to determine that its argument is plausible and appropriately presented, the SE can enlist the

help of the AE. (The SE selects the AE, who is usually one of the AE board members that the author has nominated.) The SE, when concluding the screening, can ask the author for a revision, return the manuscript unreviewed to the author because the manuscript does not fit the *Quarterly*'s editorial policy, reject the manuscript, or send the manuscript to the reviewers.

Screening is both preliminary and essential to the review process. The more work that the SE and AE put into the front end of the review process (the screening), the more readily and unproblematically the back end (the revise-and-resubmit process) will unfold.

Step 4: Selecting the Reviewers

When I am working as an SE, I share the job of reviewer selection with the AE. My custom is (1) to choose one reviewer from the authors' nominations, (2) to suggest, to the AE, an additional person that I believe to be appropriate, (3) to ask the AE to suggest someone that the AE believes to be appropriate, and (4) if necessary, for us (the AE and SE together) then to choose someone to cover any substantive or methodological aspect of the manuscript that the first three people do not cover. The AE contacts the potential reviewers by e-mail (where the title and abstract are sent) in order to secure their agreement to do the review. If I know some potential reviewers better than the AE knows them, then I contact them myself. Securing the agreement is critical; it leads to a greater commitment from the reviewers to do the job than would their suddenly receiving a package in snail mail, as was the case for many journals in the past.

There are variations in the reviewer selection process from SE to SE and from manuscript to manuscript. If the SE has worked with a particular AE in several past review processes, so that the AE and SE know each other's style, then the SE may choose to delegate a larger portion of the reviewer selection effort to the AE; such delegation also makes sense if the manuscript falls squarely in the AE's area of expertise but not the SE's. One SE offers the following advice to his AEs when selecting reviewers: "Use reviewers that you respect and can trust to be thorough, constructive and responsive as well as technically qualified"; "Use people likely to complement your own skills and perspectives"; and "Use a combination of junior scholars and more experienced scholars." Even in situations where the SE delegates much of the reviewer selection process to the AE, it is *Quarterly* policy to encourage the AE to present any questions or concerns to the SE.

I have encouraged the SEs and AEs to make sure that women and non-North-Americans are not excluded in the set of reviewers for a manuscript. Future AEs are selected largely from people who have developed a good track record in reviewing for the *Quarterly*. By failing to include women or non-North-Americans in the set of reviewers for a manuscript, an editor would be diminishing the pool of women or non-North-Americans from which future AEs would be selected. On the one hand, I do not believe in a quota system; on the other hand, I also find it hard to believe that there are no women or non-North-Americans qualified to review any particular manuscript. The task can be challenging (for instance, finding a non-North-American who is an expert in a highly specialized area of quantitative, positivist research popular in North America), but I have informed all *Quarterly* editors to do their best in leaving no stone unturned before going with a set of reviewers that does not include women or non-North-Americans.

By the way, the "objectivity" of a nominated reviewer should not be in doubt. In theory, one might suppose that a reviewer whom the author had nominated would be more sympathetic, understanding, thorough, and, overall, more favorable to the author. This is only in theory. In practice, I have observed that nominated reviewers can offer extremely negative, and correct, criticisms. Also, the *Quarterly*'s instructions to authors (available from the *MISQ* web site) contain a conflict-of-interest policy that prospective authors must follow when nominating reviewers (as well as editors).

Step 5: Waiting for the Reviews

Thanks to the *Quarterly*'s own web-based information system, it is relatively easy to monitor when reviewers have submitted their reports. Authors themselves can access the *Quarterly*'s manuscript-tracking web page, where the identities of the reviewers are hidden. A password-protected portion of the manuscript-tracking web page allows an editor to access an editor-specific page that shows his or her pending manuscripts, the due dates of the reviews, and the identities of the reviewers. For the editor, a double click on a reviewer's name opens up an e-mail window, making it easy to send a reminder.

Step 6: Writing Up the AE's Report

When I am acting as the SE for a manuscript, I practice the philosophy that I might have the final say (accept, reject, revise) on the fate of the submission; however, for manuscripts that are sent out for review, I regard the AE as having the first say and hence the biggest say. The AE exerts this influence by placing his or her own intellectual stamp on the review process when he or she pulls together the different reviews and integrates them according to his or her own perspective.

I expect the AE to recommend a decision for me to make (accept, reject, revise) and to offer a strong and well argued justification that I can endorse. An SE always expects the AE to pull together the viewpoints of the different reviewers and to add his or her own overall analysis; occasionally, however, an SE might not seek a recommendation from the AE so much as the AE's analysis of the reviews.

It is not uncommon in the review process for there to be a situation where a "tough decision" must be made. Typically, this involves a split opinion among the reviewers. At the *Quarterly*, all SEs and AEs know that the review process is *not* a voting process; it is *not* a democracy. An AE can and should give less weight to a poor review and compensate for an overly critical review. Every editor is expected to make these and other judgment calls. In theory, an AE is allowed to go against all of the reviewers (and this can be favorable to the author!) if the AE believes this is appropriate and can justify it to the SE. Also, an SE can go against the AE's recommendation, but this is rare. Sometimes, when facing a tough decision, the AE will consult with the SE prior to writing up the AE's report.

Authors will be pleased to know that if the AE's recommendation is "revise and resubmit," the AE has the option of narrowing down the field of reviewers for the next review cycle. The AE, in his or her report, can recommend that the revision go back only to a subset of the reviewers. For instance, the AE could say in his or her report: "The revision will not have to go back to all the reviewers, but can go back only to Reviewer 2. However, if I am unsure how well the revision addresses the concerns of Reviewer 1, then I might feel that it should go back to Reviewer 1 as well." A problematic reviewer (one who was seriously late, whose feedback was punitive and hurtful, who apparently did not understand the manuscript, etc.) can be cut out of the process at this point simply by the AE's not mentioning him or her in the list of reviewers to whom the revision would be sent. Letting authors know to which reviewers the revision would be sent can provide important cues to the authors in their own process of revising the manuscript.

An example I often use to dramatize the point that the review process is not a democracy involves the following: Reviewer A says to move the research "north"; Reviewer B says to move the research "south"; Reviewer C, "east"; and Reviewer D, "west." Despite the "common" recommendation of "revise," the paper would hardly be ready to proceed in the review process. It would be plausible to reject such a manuscript. Alternatively, to tell the author to proceed would require an extraordinary amount of work, risk, and even involvement on the part of the editors; they may choose to volunteer such an effort, but such a volunteer effort can never be compelled.

Step 7: Making the Final Decision in This Review Cycle

If the SE has structured the process well (i.e., correctly screened the manuscript as ready for review, selected an appropriate AE, and worked well with the AE in selecting appropriate reviewers), the chances are reasonable that the SE can readily endorse the AE's report. In other instances, especially where the process may have failed in one or another aspect, the SE may intervene so as to assure that the author experiences a satisfactory review process. This can be one reason for a long and involved letter from the SE. The SE's letter to the author specifies the decision (accept, reject, revise). The SE's letter, in referring to the AE's report and the reviewers' reports, provides a justification for the decision and, in the event of a revision, also provides guidance for the revision. The SE can propose a target date for the receipt of the revision.

Step 8: Managing a Revision

As for any submission, the author should ask for comments from trusted colleagues before releasing the revision to the *Quarterly*. Authors of revisions are also required to prepare a "response to the editors and reviewers" memorandum or report that describes how the revision addresses the editors' and reviewers' criticisms and implements their suggestions. Often, the criticisms and suggestions can be inconsistent; in these situations, the authors should carefully read the SE's letter and the AE's report for guidance.

Revisions also undergo screening. Despite the "response to the editors and reviewers" that authors submit, I have been flabbergasted at some "revisions" that have done nothing more than simply rearrange some paragraphs, or whose statistical tables are identical to their original versions despite the AE's and reviewers' requirements for a new analysis. Sometimes, I have found it necessary to compare hardcopy versions of the original and the revision, page by page, just to identify if there are any changes. Such revisions do not fare well in the screening process and can easily merit a rejection even without being sent to the reviewers.

Conclusion

Sure, it is important to do good research, involving a literature review, the use of theory, an appropriate method, and so forth. However, good research does not publish itself. Authors might also prudently take advantage of knowledge of how a journal works, especially where the journal shares such "inside" knowledge with them.

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