Editor's Comments

In this editor's commentary, I am updating readers on our electronic reviewing process, identifying behaviors that lead to (exceptionally) long review cycles, and suggesting actions by authors, referees, and our Editorial Board and staff to improve both the quality and timeliness of reviews. The commentary concludes with announcements about the "history trilogy" being published in this issue and recent Editorial Board changes.

Reducing the Cycle-Time of the *MIS Quarterly's* Review Process

Efficient and effective journal refereeing processes are extremely important to academicians. Rich, cogent editorial comments can significantly enhance a manuscript's value-added contribution to the literature. Research topics or data can become dated if review processes extend beyond reasonable limits. More important, tardy or faulty reviews can prove damaging to an author facing a forthcoming promotion and/or tenure decision.

For all of these reasons, past and current *MIS Quarterly* senior editors have been very concerned about improving our editorial review processes. In particular, over the last two years, we have made considerable progress in moving to a fully electronic review process. In summary form, this process works as follows (after the initial editorial decision that a manuscript should undergo a formal review):

- electronic mail (e-mail) is used to locate an associate editor for the manuscript;

- the associate editor accesses and reads an electronic version of the manuscript;

- the senior editor and the associate editor engage in a dialogue via e-mail to generate a list of four or five potential referees who would be appropriate for the manuscript;

- the associate editor contacts these potential referees to gain up-front commitment by the referees to return their review within a three- to four-week period once the manuscript is electronically made available to them (generally, such commitment is obtained from three or four referees);

- referees access the manuscript from a password-protected website;

- referees enter their review via a form located on the password-protected website (once entered, the review is automatically sent to the associate editor and senior editor as an e-mail message via a distribution list established for the manuscript);

- once all reviews have been submitted, the associate editor makes his/her recommendation and submits this recommendation electronically to the manuscript's distribution list; and

- once the senior editor receives the associate editor's recommendation, the senior editor makes an editorial decision regarding the manuscript and then electronically sends to the author(s) a senior editor letter, the associate editor's recommendation, and the referee comments.

When this electronically enabled review process unfolds smoothly, it works extremely well. Cycle times of between three and four months are the norm; when things "click" extremely well, we do experience complete first round review cycles of as short as five or six weeks. I hope all authors submitting manuscripts to the *Quarterly* have experienced at least one of these "smoothly flowing" review processes.

As much as I would rather not have to admit it, not all of our review processes unfold as described above. Glitches, delays, and disruptions do occasionally arise, although we would like to believe that these are occurring less frequently over time. Some of these problems are beyond our control.

Occasionally, they can be traced to behaviors (or lack of behaviors!) of senior editors, associate editors, or our editorial staff; more often, they are traced to referee actions (or lack of actions). Let me briefly explain.

Problems do surface that are beyond our control. First, some authors have experienced considerable difficulties in providing us with an electronic version of their manuscripts. In a few cases, it has taken a month or more to get a viable electronic version of a manuscript. In rare instances, we have had to send referees hard copies of a manuscript. Second, our editorial office has experienced hardware problems (disk crashes, lost messages, etc.). Whenever an organization becomes dependent on technology-enabled work processes, the potential of technology-induced problems dramatically increases. Since the editorial office has recently made extensive enhancements to its technology, we expect such problems to occur with far less frequency. Third, our editors and editorial staff do travel and are otherwise absent from work. Such absences can and do introduce delays to a review process.

Occasionally, delays are introduced by our editors and editorial staff because their workload has increased to the point that certain editorial tasks are put on hold until these other tasks are completed. Further, at times, it does become necessary for Editorial Board members to dialogue with one another regarding a specific issue with a submission. This (along with the globalization of the *Quarterly*'s Editorial Board) can introduce additional delays. Most often, however, our heavy use of e-mail greatly accelerates such dialogues. Finally, occasions do arise where editors simply "lose track" of a manuscript, i.e., a manuscript's review deadline has passed without all reviews being submitted, but neither the associate editor nor the senior editor recognize this fact. While we all strive to minimize these delays, they have and will continue to occur. We are working to ensure that such delays, when they occur, tend to be on the order of days, not weeks.

By far, the major reason for distortions occurring in the timeliness of our review process lies with our referees. I certainly do not wish to imply that this is a "blanket critique"—it certainly is not. The great majority of our referees do honor the three- to four-week commitment to return a manuscript's review. Remember, it only takes one tardy referee to dramatically lengthen a manuscript's cycle time. Sometimes, an associate editor can act in the absence of a tardy review. But, if the other reviews are mixed or if the associate editor highly values the insights of the tardy referee, the associate editor may feel compelled to wait for this tardy review . . . and wait . . . and wait. What then results is a five- or six- or seven-month review cycle.

Why are some referees late in providing their reviews? There are many reasons. Here is a listing of the most common:

- the referee decides to perform the review a day or so before the review deadline, and then something comes up that causes the referee to delay even further;

- the referee decides to perform the review a day or so before the review deadline, and then forgets about this task until reminded;

- the referee has difficulty in downloading the manuscript and asks that a paper copy be sent;

- the referee has difficulty in uploading his/her review, which is then faxed or surface-mailed to the *MIS Quarterly* editorial office;

- the referee has difficulty in uploading his/her review, and decides to just e-mail a copy of the review to the associate editor; the associate editor does not recognize this, resulting in neither the senior editor nor the *MIS Quarterly* editorial staff receiving a copy of the review; and

- the referee becomes frustrated with the poor quality of a manuscript and experiences difficulty in developing the motivation to complete the review.

Regardless of the cause, the delays induced by such behaviors can add days or weeks to a review process—especially if there is a lack of vigilance by the associate editor and senior editor.

It is obviously extremely important for *MIS Quarterly* Editorial Board members to exhibit vigilance in maintaining an awareness of the status of manuscripts they handle. The editorial office has recently made significant enhancements to the reports available to associate editors and senior editors for this express purpose. I have requested, and will continue to request, all associate and senior editors to regularly check the status of the manuscripts they are handling such that potentially problematic review processes can be identified and, ideally, prevented. However, even with a vigilant Editorial Board and editorial staff, extended review cycles will occur due to the actions (or lack of actions) of authors and referees. To conclude this editorial comment, I offer suggestions to both authors and referees:

Authors

1. Follow the editorial guidelines (http://www.misq.org/roadmap/standards.html) for authors! In particular, include an electronic version of your manuscript with the initial submission. To accelerate the process further, transmit an electronic version of your manuscript to the selected senior editor at the same time you submit the manuscript to the *MIS Quarterly* editorial office.

2. Do not submit your manuscript until it has been peer-reviewed and you are satisfied that it is in as good shape as possible (in the absence of editorial input). My experiences (as an author, referee, and editor) suggest that a strong correlation exists between the initial quality of a submitted manuscript and the quality and timeliness of that manuscript's review process. In order to not overburden our referees, the *Quarterly*'s senior and associate editors invest a huge amount of time prescreening submitted manuscripts. Currently, between one-third and one-half of submitted articles are returned to authors (as being inappropriate for the *Quarterly*'s editorial mission, as being of insufficient quality to warrant further consideration, or as needing obvious revision) without a formal review. This is a heavy burden for our senior and associate editors, but a burden that could largely be eliminated if authors were more diligent prior to submitting their manuscripts. I strongly encourage all potential authors to (1) read the editorial comments I prepared in 1995 and 1996 providing guidance as to how to "craft" a manuscript and (2) locate a recently published *MIS Quarterly* article similar to that being submitted and objectively compare (the content and structure of) this published article with your own.

3. Consider electronically transmitting your article to the selected senior editor for a "preview" prior to formally submitting the manuscript. Often, a senior editor can very quickly identify ways of increasing the likelihood that a manuscript will be favorably received.

4. Be sure to nominate one or more associate editors and three or four knowledgeable referees for your manuscript. Of course, you should not nominate a co-worker or recent collaborator to serve either of these roles.

5. Regularly check the status of your manuscript using the "manuscript tracking" page on MISQ Central (http://160.94.4.138/review/status.asp). If you begin to be concerned about the length of your manuscript's review process, please contact the senior editor and ask him/her to look into the situation.

Referees

1. Handle all reviews that you agree to undertake in the same manner with which you would like your own submitted manuscripts treated. Try to complete the review sooner rather than later. Put it near the top of your "to-do" list. Don't view the "due date" as the "start date."

2. Make use of the electronic, automated features of our review process. They should make your work easier, not harder. They do work! If you are experiencing technical difficulties, they most

likely are attributed to problems at your site. If you are uncomfortable working in a "fully electron-ic mode," view the review process as a learning opportunity.

3, If you know you will be unable to meet a review deadline, don't accept the assignment when queried by an associate editor. Our associate editors are very reasonable people, and they rec-ognize that requests to undertake reviews can arrive at bad times.

4. If you have agreed to review a manuscript but then find yourself in an unexpected bind (for what-ever reason), please inform the associate editor of this as soon as possible. Early notice of a late or problematic review enables the senior editor and associate editor to take appropriate action, e.g., await the late review, obtain a replacement referee, make the editorial decision given the other reviews, etc.

While following the above practices might introduce slight inconveniences into your professional life, they are quite small compared to the benefits that might be realized. It is important to remind everyone that referee performance (quality and timeliness) is a dominant criteria when the senior editors identify candidates for *MIS Quarterly* associate editor positions.

I would also like to take this opportunity to stress the professional obligation of all scholars to serve the referee role. We do expect all *MIS Quarterly* authors and readers to be willing to contribute to the jour-nal by serving as a referee. One rule of thumb (suggested by another of our senior editors) is that an individual should referee three manuscripts for every manuscript they submit to the *Quarterly* (as this, minimally, is the workload generated by a submitted manuscript). While I am not aware of it happening in the past, the potential always exists that we might refuse to consider a manuscript for publication if the manuscript's author consistently refused requests to serve as a referee for other manuscripts.

This editorial comment has not been written because I am concerned about the *Quarterly*'s review process. In fact, just the opposite is true. As mentioned earlier, most of our review cycles are conclud-ed within a three- to four-month period, and some are completed in even shorter review cycles. However, exceptions do occur, and it is these exceptions that have motivated this commentary. If everyone involved (editors, editorial staff, authors, referees) behaves in a professionally responsible manner, the vast majority of manuscripts should experience, at most, three- to four-month review cycles. Thanks, in advance, for your cooperation.

Announcements

I am proud to direct readers' attention to the articles by Dick Mason, Jim McKenney, and Duncan Copeland, which together develop, describe, and illustrate the use of "historical methods" in MIS research. Please note that, in addition to separate abstracts for each article, the authors also provide an introduction to the set of three articles preceding the article "Developing an Historical Tradition in MIS Research." That historical methods have been rarely applied in MIS research is not surprising given that they involve exceptional interviewing skills, rich contacts, and lengthy research projects. I hope that the publication of these three articles both signals the value the *MIS Quarterly* finds in this genre of research and motivates others to apply these methods in their own research.

Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to two exceptional scholars who are leaving the *MIS Quarterly* Editorial Board with this issue. Having completed his three-year term as a senior editor, Allen Lee is stepping off the Editorial Board. I am sure everyone recognizes how Allen's rich insights and perspectives on intensive research methods have enriched many of the articles published over the last few years in the *Quarterly*. What most people have not had the opportunity to experience have been Allen's "behind-the-scenes" contributions: working with authors to significantly enhance their articles, managing his manuscript workload in a timely manner, carrying on electronic dialogues with Editorial Board members, providing significant input into the strategic direction of the journal, etc. Thanks for

your many years of service, Allen! Luckily, as Allen is involved (as co-editor with Lynne Markus) with the Special Issue on Intensive Research Methods, we will be able to benefit for a bit more time from Allen's inputs to our editorial processes and direction. Finally, I wish to acknowledge Chris Kemerer's contribution to the *Quarterly* as an associate editor, both for an initial three-year appointment and then for a two-year reappointment. Thanks, Chris, for your valuable—and always highly professional—service to the journal.

—Bob Zmud
Editor-In-Chief