

Science Editing at an Indian Firm: Perspectives of Two US Visitors

Bernard Appiah

Keeping track of manuscripts manually can be difficult. An editing firm in Mumbai, India—Cactus Communications Pvt Ltd—uses technology to make the task easier. Thus observed US science editors Kim Berman and Leslie E Neistadt, who were in Mumbai last November to conduct the first two Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) examinations given in India. The examinations were given in India because of the growing population of science editors there.

Berman is a freelance medical writer and editor. Neistadt is the managing editor of the *Journal of Athletic Training*. They both serve on the Executive Council of BELS.

Cactus Communications has 63 in-house editors and writers, divided into three discipline-related teams (medicine and life sciences, humanities, and physical sciences). The firm also uses a pool of more than 70 freelance editors and writers in India, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Forty editors took part in the examinations—34 employees of Cactus and six of other organizations.

Berman and Neistadt reported both similarities and differences between science editing at Cactus and that with which they are familiar in the United States. They also offered some observations on giving the BELS examination in India.

Before the examinations, Berman and Neistadt visited Cactus.

“When we got to the offices of Cactus, I felt right at home and ready to start editing manuscripts,” Neistadt said. “In many ways, it was like walking into an editorial office anywhere.”

A typical day for a US author’s editor—sitting at the computer for hours,

responding to e-mail, and revising manuscripts—appeared to be the same for colleagues at Cactus, Berman and Neistadt noted. However, they identified some differences from the US work environment. “Many of the editors sit close to each other in cubicles,” Neistadt said. “That seemed very unusual to us.” Berman and Neistadt also learned that Cactus has a system whereby senior editors are readily available to their junior colleagues when problems arise. Thus, issues can be resolved quickly.

Berman and Neistadt noted that Cactus has clients in a variety of countries, including China, Japan, Korea, and the United States. Therefore, the editors must deal with multiple time zones. They do so by having different teams work at different times; some work from evening to morning.

“The dense vehicular traffic and crowded daytime trains in Mumbai may favor working at night,” Berman speculated. “The cars, buses, trucks, and minicabs were usually bumper to bumper on all the roads, but we didn’t see a single traffic accident.”

The teams have 9-hour shifts to ensure that working hours of all clients are covered. Jobs that must be done over the weekend are handled by a team of freelance editors and writers who are mainly in the United States.

Berman and Neistadt observed how the editors meet the challenge of working with authors who have a variety of native languages. “Editors who are multi-



Editors at Cactus Communications.

lingual are assigned to work with authors in their native languages,” Neistadt said. Familiarity with the cultural and editorial customs of different countries helps the editors relate to their clients.

Berman and Neistadt were impressed with how editors at Cactus use technology in their work. “The editors at Cactus have an in-house Web page and customized software for tracking who is handling a particular manuscript at any time,” Neistadt said. “Those tools allow continual improvement of procedures for processing manuscripts.”

In addition, Berman and Neistadt were impressed by the continuing-education culture at Cactus. “Continuing education is a very important part of the corporate philosophy, with experienced staff members setting up in-house training programs for newer editors, designing online training programs for the staff, and working with all parts of the company to ensure that the staff delivers quality products to clients,” Neistadt said.

But education of the editors begins much earlier than that. “All our in-house editors and writers go through an extensive 3-week training program before they actually start working on documents,” says Elvira D’souza, the manager of medical-writing services at Cactus. “The training program

BERNARD APPIAH, a graduate student in science and technology journalism at Texas A&M University, is the current Science Editor intern.

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includes not only grammar training but modules on cultural sensitization wherein our editors and writers are familiarized with the cultures of our target markets.”

Berman and Neistadt compared the administration of the BELS examination in India with that in the United States. In the United States, distractions inside and outside the examination room can be a problem. “In India, however, the candidates remained focused throughout the examination period,” Neistadt said. “We surmised that the editors are accustomed to

working near each other and ‘tuning out’ potential interruptions.”

All editors who took the examination in India had degrees in the sciences. According to the Cactus Web site, all Cactus editors have at least a bachelor’s degree, about 46% have master’s degrees, 4% have PhDs, and 6% have MDs.

Berman and Neistadt reported that the pass rate on the BELS examination in India was about two-thirds, as it is in the United States.

Despite their positive experience in visiting Cactus and administering the BELS examination for the first time in India, Berman and Neistadt had one disappointment: “Our only frustration during our stay in India was lack of time,” Neistadt said. “Mumbai is a fascinating place, and everyone we met made us feel welcome. We wished we had more time there.”

Berman concluded that “we hope to proctor the examination in India again in the near future.” 