Conducting an Editor-in-Chief Search

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The editor-in-chief serves as the guiding force of the journal. When it’s time for a change in leadership, whether scheduled or unscheduled, the selection and appointment of a new editor can be fraught with the perils of bias, conflicting priorities, and internal politics. Conducting an editor search was the focus of a session this spring during CSE’s annual meeting in Baltimore, MD.

Carissa Gilman moderated the session, which focused on best practices. For example, a search plan should explain:

- The process and timeline.
- How to select search-committee members.
- How to build an applicant pool.
- What information is desired from applicants.

One of the first steps is to establish a realistic timeline. Kathey Alexander said the search committee should set the schedule, which can span 12–18 months. The process, she continued, should be clearly defined.

The search committee should know what qualities it is seeking in a journal editor. Proprietary journals may recruit specific editors, rather than selecting from an applicant pool, as many society-owned journals do, Alexander added.

For society-owned journals, Alexander discussed how the decision often is made by committee—which can lead to political minefields—and how high-profile, prestigious, and influential editors often are sought.

Esmeralda Galan Buchanan explained how the editor role at the American Cancer Society is a bit different from some.

For instance, the editor reviews editorial trends but does not make budgetary or business decisions. The editor has a 10-year tenure limit and receives a quarterly honorarium. A challenge for Cancer Cytopathology was that the journal had a small, tight-knit community of experts, and an associate editor was interested in the position but was from the same institution as the editor. For Cancer, the large oncology community posed the opposite potential problem of too many applicants. In addition, the editor and several section editors worked at the same institution.

The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), where Kelly Hadsell is assistant director for editorial systems and journal manager for Cancer Research, has an initial 5-year term for the editor, with an option for an additional 2-year term, plus a small annual honorarium.

Alexander said one of the prerequisites for finding a great editor is using a trusted search committee. All should agree on the ground rules, be unbiased, adhere to confidentiality, and commit their time to the process, she continued, noting the current editor should not formally serve on the selection committee, a sentiment echoed by others on the panel.

Galan Buchanan said the search committee for Cancer Cytopathology consisted of five committee members and two advisers. A publisher may serve as a nonvoting member of the search committee. Committee members should submit conflict-of-interest forms. She also suggested asking someone from the journal staff, such as the managing editor, to attend meetings and provide insight on day-to-day duties.

Alexander told the CSE audience not to assume the best candidates will apply. The search committee should advertise the position and create a short list of people to convince to apply, a process that may take 2–3 months. The speakers noted that candidates could be asked to submit their CV, a letter of interest, a vision statement, and a conflict-of-interest disclosure form.

Galan Buchanan cautioned against assuming someone is too busy or would not be interested in the job. For Cancer Cytopathology, the search committee, the editor, the society’s chief medical officer, and the editorial board recruited potential candidates. All associate editors were invited to apply. Special invitations were sent to six people, three of whom applied.

For Cancer, Buchanan said the leadership was seeking a new vision to build the online strategy and needed someone who could handle ethical issues faced by the journal, but the journal had a fixed honorarium.

They posted the ad, job description, and forms online and in print for all three American Cancer Society journals. They also sent an e-mail with the call for applications to the editorial board and top 100 authors and e-mailed section editors to encourage them to apply. No applications were received, however. For the next 6 weeks, the committee developed lists of potential candidates. They sent invitations to 16 candidates, and five applied.
Hadsell said a call for application and nominations was placed on the AACR Web site and in the journals. Letters were sent to the board of directors, the scientific advisory committee, committee leaders, and editors of all AACR journals to solicit nominations.

Hadsell encouraged rating applicants on a numeric scale to assess objectively how they fit into the organization. Categories could include editorial experience, leadership experience, ability to collaborate, strength of CV, vision statement, and written communication.

After the first cut, the speakers agreed the selection committee should explore the ideas of the remaining candidates by asking them to respond to a series of questions, in part to test their ability to easily convey ideas. Categories could include structure and use of editorial board, organization of the journal, innovative ideas, print and online understanding, ethics and conflict of interest, and time commitment. After responses are rated, finalists can be identified, and face-to-face interviews held. Galan Buchanan noted that for Cancer Cytopathology, the editor was asked to provide feedback on each applicant.

Other questions to consider include whether the candidate is a society member, has an international network in the scientific community, and possesses the ability to attract authors and editors. Hadsell said AACR finalists are asked to provide a letter of support from their dean or chair. The search task force, the society CEO, and the publisher interview finalists. Votes are taken and the decision sent to the AACR board for approval via eballot. The finalist signs a letter of understanding.

Alexander cautioned to always have a first choice and a back-up. Hadsell suggested staff contact the editor-elect to set up orientation and transition discussions. Galan Buchanan added the finalist for Cancer Cytopathology began her tenure at the beginning of the year but unofficially began reviewing data 3 months before.