The Role of Managing Editor: An Overview

Gary M Smith

Although their responsibilities may vary from journal to journal, effective managing editors of scientific publications possess well-developed organizational and interpersonal skills, administrative experience, and an understanding of the publishing process.

Whenever I am in a nonjournal environment and answer the question “What do you do for a living?” I always know the next question: “So, what does a managing editor do?” I am used to it, though, since I worked for 10 years as a technical writer (another one of those professionally vague titles).

When I moved into the field of managing a biomedical publication, I was surprised at the lack of information about being a managing editor. Although a number of guides and articles are available for the editor-in-chief (1–7), organizations such as the Council of Biology Editors (CBE), American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP), and the Society for Technical Communication (STC) too infrequently address the role of managing editors in their trade journals and at conferences. I wrote this article to help fill the gap.

Granted, CBE members now have the opportunity to join others in their particular areas of expertise—including managing editors—at networking breakfasts during annual conferences, but in general little attention is given to this type of editing. This article, based on my personal experience as a managing editor, also includes what I have learned by interacting with others in my position and with editors-in-chief within the life sciences and other disciplines.

The inattention to managing editors and the nebulous definition shrouding this title could be due to the wide range of responsibilities that vary with each discipline as well as within each editorial office. For instance, the managing editor of Science quite possibly has different responsibilities from the managing editor of Hypertension, which also probably differ from those of the managing editor of Arctic and Alpine Research. While a managing editor may concentrate on budgeting, personnel issues, and article solicitation, review, and tracking, another may edit copy and proof galleys, leaving the fiscal responsibilities to the publisher, editor-in-chief, or the housing institution’s accounting and finance departments.

Background

My journal, Hypertension, is one of 5 primary scientific publications sponsored by a nonprofit association that funds all operations and overhead with income generated from subscriptions, page charges, and advertising. One of my responsibilities is to monitor the financial aspects of operations, although the duties of advertising and subscription sales normally are assumed by the publisher. The journal is published monthly and is sent to approximately 4000 subscribers. It operates on a multiyear contract with the editor-in-chief and staff, which provides the journal with a different perspective when a new editor takes over at the end of the contract.

The editorial office staff for my journal consists of the managing editor, 2 associate managing editors, and a department secretary. We receive about 1000 new submissions each year and are responsible for manuscript receipt and check-in as well as all functions associated with contacting potential referees, forwarding manuscripts to them and receiving reviews from them, and tracking every stage of each process. No copyedit-

ing is performed in the editorial office; it is done at the publishing house, which is located in another state. Consequently, page proofs are sent to the authors from the publisher, and revisions are incorporated by the publisher. Decisions about what manuscripts to publish are made by the editor-in-chief and 2 associate editors, who select at least 2 reviewers for each manuscript.

Two sponsored supplements, published in addition to the regular monthly issues, comprise accepted manuscripts received from the meetings of 2 scientific societies, one held annually and the other every 2 years. In addition to the supplemental issues, the journal also publishes within regular issues a number of papers from other meetings.

Qualifications

The qualifications for managing-editor candidates vary with the particular discipline and the specific structure of the editorial office, but the most appropriate candidates have a variety of skills. The educational backgrounds of managing editors of life science journals also vary, ranging from an undergraduate degree in a medical field, such as nursing or hospital administration, to a graduate degree in business. In my case, my education included a triple major in business, journalism, and English with graduate work in communications. The expertise that most interested my editor, though, was my strong background in the peer-review process and a familiarity with publishing and printing. Extensive training in developing policy and procedure manuals also may have been a plus.

Good candidates for managing editor positions possess well-developed organizational and interpersonal skills, some administrative background with financial management, and an understanding of publishing processes. The managing editor, who often is selected by the editor-in-chief, often is responsible for managing a staff, so experience in personnel administration may be required. If the journal’s editor-in-chief works only part-time, a managing editor...
may offer suggestions about decisions to publish an article based on the referees' comments. Moreover, if the journal is sponsored by the institution in which it is housed, the managing editor may be able to leave financial and personnel administrative responsibilities to the housing facility.

Some experience with computer hardware and software, as well as a working knowledge of the Internet, is desirable because managing editors often are expected to generate, process, maintain, and archive a large amount of information both electronically and on paper. Managing editors may want to play a role in the long-range planning of the journal as well, which often means addressing the effects of the electronic world on publication. Also, they should be aware of issues related to the use of e-mail, the design and maintenance of Websites, general use of the Internet as a research tool, and the effects this technology can have on the way we do our jobs and on the publication of scientific information in general.

Setting Up the Editorial Office
A managing editor will likely be responsible for setting up the editorial office when a contract is awarded. Since the editor-in-chief often is a practicing physician or a research scientist (or both), the managing editor may be in charge of purchasing all office equipment including the computer hardware and software, photocopier and fax machines, and furniture. He or she also may need to arrange for overnight express-mail contracts and computer terminals, hire staff and set their salaries, and establish procedures for that staff concerning the general operation and maintenance of the office. To this end, the managing editor should recognize that an excellent resource includes peers with experience in the field because they frequently can offer an abundance of pertinent information.

When my journal moved to its present location, we developed a new filing system and manuscript-tracking procedure. This necessitated the purchase of new computer equipment in addition to buying furniture and office supplies, and locating reasonably priced office space within our institution. Manuscript files from the previous editorial office were shipped to the new location, and processing of these submissions had to continue without any loss of continuity as the new manuscripts arrived.

One way to ensure an expeditious and organized transition is to develop a rapport with the outgoing managing editor to facilitate the transfer of files and discussion of previous procedures. Besides already having experience in this position, this person will know the journal's history as well as the most recent operating practices. Although the new editor-in-chief may want to operate the editorial review process his or her way, the new staff can learn much from its predecessor to facilitate a smooth transition.

As a professional courtesy to help establish the new editorial office, the outgoing managing editor most likely will involve the new managing editor in the transfer process. Consequently, the new managing editor should be willing to work long hours for extended periods of time to develop forms and letters from available resources (8) and to establish budgets.

Another task the managing editor may want to undertake once the office is operational is to develop office procedures. When I became a managing editor, I was intrigued by the fact that no manual or guide existed in either my office or any one else's with whom I interacted. However, since I had a background in technical writing, I decided to document everything we did from printing mailing labels to logging the names of reviewers (or "referees", the term preferred by the purists (9)) into the database. It took a good 5 to 6 months of 12- to 14-hour days to complete the project, but when I was finished I had a set of procedures that we still use as a reference guide.

After a couple of years of interacting with my peers, I discovered that a guide such as mine would be invaluable to other managing editors and perhaps editors-in-chief. Therefore, I undertook the next labor-intensive, after-hours project of redeveloping the text to present more contingencies but in a more generic format that described all process chronologically to reflect the editorial office operations and included chapters on related topics such as personnel administration and database management (Table). Moreover, the text contains various forms, letters, and faxes used for everything from correspondence to preparation of materials for publication as well as charts showing both organi-

### Table of Contents of *The Peer-Reviewed Journal: A Comprehensive Guide Through the Editorial Process*

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Note: For more information on this book, contact the author, Gary Smith, in New Orleans, Louisiana, by telephone at 504-895-5219.
zational structure and the flow of manuscripts from receipt to publication.

Another approach to setting up a smooth-running journal is to develop and maintain a high level of esprit de corps among editorial-office employees. The managing editor may want to restructure responsibilities as well as job titles. For instance, in my office I changed the title of the editorial assistant to associate managing editor and the department secretary became the assistant managing editor. Eventually, I revised both job titles making the assistant an associate because it seemed appropriate to have both jobs interchangeable for when staff members are out of the office for extended periods such as vacation and sick or maternity leave.

Liaison
Managing editors should remember that they may be the 1st person from the editorial office to make contact with authors. Consequently, managing editors must be diplomatic and sensitive to the personalities of authors, who may be respected scientists highly recognized in their fields. It is important for managing editors to be tactful in all personal interactions with those involved in the editorial process including editors, referees, and authors.

The managing editor should ensure that the editor-in-chief understands the work flow developed for the editorial office and should keep the editor-in-chief and the associate editors informed about journal activities on a timely basis. As a general rule, the managing editor should be helpful and available to answer questions from everyone involved in the peer-review process.

Other important liaisons are between the publisher, copyeditors, and possibly even the printer. In my situation, I prepare final materials for submission to the editorial projects coordinator at the publishing house. She, in turn, assigns the manuscript to a copyeditor and monitors revisions transferred between the authors and the copyeditor. The coordinator also serves as liaison with the printer to ensure timely publication of the final version of the paper. If given the opportunity, the managing editor may wish to provide input to the publisher in setting standards for printing requirements and layout and design.

Although a publisher may assume promotional responsibilities, the financial structure of journal operations often benefit if the managing editor is willing to work with the editor-in-chief to ensure that the publisher's media point-of-contact receives suggestions for press releases. Moreover, the editors may choose to offer suggestions to advertising personnel because funding for page budgets may be directly proportional to the revenue generated by journal subscriptions and advertising sales.

Making Policy
Even though the funding source may have the ultimate responsibility for dictating policies for manuscript submission and publication, the editorial office usually has the job of enforcing adherence to the instructions to authors and compliance with editorial office checklists, as well as acquiring the appropriate paperwork such as diskette-description forms, copyright-transfer agreements, and signed permission-to-be-acknowledged forms. Although these details are important to ensure expeditious handling of manuscripts, managing editors may determine to what degree manuscripts at submission must conform to the established guidelines for authors.

One important consideration is, however, that the managing editor avoid procedures that directly conflict with those established by the publisher. For example, although some journal offices may use e-mail for the manuscript-review process and some publishers may offer manuscripts online to subscribers, the managing editor should ensure that such practices are approved by the editor-in-chief as well as the funding source before initiating them. The reason is that copyrights and confidentiality may be compromised by electronic transmission, which may, in turn, initiate litigation since many scientific authors depend on publication for promotions and to qualify for grants to further their research. Therefore, overnight express mail and fax machines may be better if the security of proprietary information is a concern.

With regard to adherence to guidelines for contributors, the editorial office may choose not to require strict adherence on initial submission of a manuscript since the paper may be rejected at an early stage in the review process. Consequently, the managing editor may use a system that allows varied stages of conformance such as an initial checklist that identifies problems that could prevent further handling of a paper. Then, for manuscripts that survive the 1st stage of review, these problems can be integrated into a more detailed checklist of necessary editorial changes that is sent to the authors with the referees' reviews. Delaying request for conformance until this stage is helpful because the paper is now more likely to be accepted and the authors can make the editorial changes while responding to the referees' and editor-in-chief's requests for changes in content. When a paper is accepted, the managing editor may use a final checklist to request the last of the editorial office and publisher requirements for style and format in addition to any further revisions to the manuscript suggested by the referees or the editorial board.

Managing editors may find that revising submission guidelines can be enlightening and rewarding, especially when the level of conformance of submissions arriving in the editorial office increases noticeably. Good resources for revising submission requirements include guidelines from other journals as well as the "Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals"(10).

A managing editor also needs to understand that although policies have been established, revising them and adding new procedures may be appropriate. The consummate optimist might discover that what initially is seen as a tough decision can actually be an opportunity to improve a process or procedure. For example, when an author contest-
ed the removal of his name, which was done without his prior knowledge, I developed a letter requesting the signatures of authors whose names had been removed from the list of authors or had been moved to the acknowledgments section of the paper. This revised policy has averted a number of authorship disputes to date.

The procedures related to handling rejected manuscripts also are of paramount importance. The managing editor must be sensitive to the concerns of authors of manuscripts not accepted, promptly notifying them so they can resubmit their manuscripts quickly to another journal if they choose. Moreover, the author's materials should be returned in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. For instance, although it usually is appropriate to return to the authors the glossy prints of figures, it may not be necessary to use overnight mail or to return entire manuscripts, which simply can be shredded, unless the authors have provided a self-addressed, stamped envelope for this purpose.

Quality Control
Quality control of editorial office operations includes a variety of areas ranging from ensuring the integrity of the referee database to monitoring the appearance of the masthead. Although the quality of articles published is the direct responsibility of the editor-in-chief, the managing editor may control other aspects of journal management such as manuscript length, the quality and quantity of figures and tables (ensuring clarity whereas the editor-in-chief and referees ensure accuracy), and efficient organization of the manuscript packet to accommodate the referees, who usually review papers on a pro bono basis. In some journals, however, the editor-in-chief may choose to be involved in all areas of operation and to monitor all submissions for format as well as content relevancy.

Although referee selection is often the responsibility of the editor-in-chief, it may be the managing editor who maintains the database of referees. Moreover, the managing editor is often the person responsible for ensuring that the reviews are received by the editorial office in a timely manner (within deadlines) and are complete, appropriate, and sufficiently structured as established by any guidelines for referees.

With regard to manuscript reviews, the managing editor should not depend totally on the peer reviewers or even the editor-in-chief to detect flaws in the review system. Some editors maintain that the primary responsibility of referees is to monitor scientific relevancy and statistical accuracy, while the editor-in-chief's responsibility is to ensure a fair and impartial review process prior to making a final decision (11-14). Consequently, it may be up to the managing editor to determine if and when defects occur in manuscript handling in general, and in the review process in particular. Specifically, the managing editor monitors the reviewing schedule and appropriately yet respectfully contacts the referees when their reviews are late. The managing editor also ensures that accepted manuscripts are not held for inordinate periods of time before actually being published.

Managing editors also should be vigilant for errors in materials that are published. For instance, although they may not have time to read and mark up page proofs, they should at least point out problem areas or weaknesses in the copyediting, even if after the work is published. In my case, I inform the editorial projects coordinator of such problems, whereas with other journals the managing editor may work directly with the copyeditor or may serve in this capacity himself or herself.

If the journal accepts more manuscripts than the page budget will allow, the managing editor should monitor the number of manuscripts that have been submitted to the publisher but that have not yet been assigned to an issue. This pool should not comprise more than an issue or two of manuscripts because this no longer would be considered rapid dissemination of scientific information.

When a number of manuscripts have been copyedited and are available for publishing, an order of papers for publication is developed and submitted to the publisher in time to avoid printing delays or conflicts with the printer's schedule. If the managing editor or inhouse copyeditor reviews page proofs, this also must be done in compliance with the printer's schedule.

The managing editor also may become familiar with such indicators as the ISI impact factor citation index. Such information is valuable to everyone from the managing editor and the editor-in-chief to the funding source because it indicates how often a journal is cited. Another barometer of success is letters of thanks from authors for fair and impartial reviews of a manuscript and for the helpful comments generated. Occasionally, such letters may be received regarding a manuscript that was rejected, and this reflects positively on the performance of the journal staff.

Expectations
A managing editor may experience an irregular and unpredictable workload as the number of submitted manuscripts varies and creates a "feast or famine" environment. In addition, scientists in other countries often take vacations for varying lengths of time than their American counterparts, prompting an erratic inflow of submissions.

With regard to submissions for supplements, a managing editor may be required to attend out-of-town scientific sessions and other meetings that involve receiving manuscripts for consideration for publication. This may involve working with guest editors, section editors, referees, and all of their staffs. Such meetings also can change publishing schedules if supplements to the regular issues are published. Moreover, procedures for processing submissions and for the general review process may need to be revised as well.

Professional Affiliations
The managing editor may join professional organizations, even if the cost of membership must be absorbed by the individual. Alliance with societies and associations avails
the managing editor of a body of timely literature appropriate to the field and offers the opportunity to contribute to such literature by writing articles about current issues and concerns and about one's own experience, which can be of value to others in the field. Article topics include operating procedures, authorship issues, duplicate publication, and conflicts of interest between authors and the suppliers of specimens, equipment, and funds used in research.

Since organizations that specifically address the concerns of managing editors are few, a managing editor may advocate and promote growth of the vocation by initiating and organizing discussion and special interest groups (15), as well as meetings, mini-conferences, and retreats designed for managing editors. Moreover, a managing editor should recognize that attending conferences provides unlimited networking opportunity and could prove beneficial to his or her professional development. Some resources include STC's Scientific Communication Professional Interest Committee, designed like a special interest group to address the concerns of writers and editors in biology and life sciences; AMWA, which attracts editorial professionals in a variety of disciplines; and the CBE Short Course for Journal Editors, held annually prior to the CBE annual meeting.

**Final Thoughts**

Serving as a managing editor provides an excellent opportunity to sharpen organizational as well as human-relations skills and to gain useful knowledge in areas that may not be directly related to editorial-office management. Although a managing editor's formal job description may delineate specific responsibilities, they can involve themselves in other areas such as desktop or electronic publishing, international policymaking, and contributing to the body of literature regarding peer-reviewed journal operation and management. A managing editor's growth potential and capacity to make a difference in the field is limited only by his or her initiative.

Because managing editors reap the benefits of broadening their skill base and enhancing their professional alliances, they also should be willing to put forth the time and energy to produce a quality publication that not only promulgates scientific research for the authors but stimulates discourse and interaction among its readers. In sum, managing editors should do all they can during their terms to produce a relevant and professional journal.

**References**


**Suggested Reading**


