

# Manuscript-Tracking Databases: Build or Buy?

## Speakers:

### Alexander D Politis

*Journal of Immunology*  
Bethesda, Maryland

### Dana St John Kolar

*Circulation*  
St Luke's Episcopal Hospital/  
Texas Heart Institute  
Houston, Texas

### Lynn D Foster

Electronic Publishing Solutions  
Celina, Texas

## Reporter:

### Mary J Nickum

*Intermountain Journal of Sciences*  
Bozeman, Montana

Three editors shared their experiences in developing or acquiring manuscript-tracking systems at their institutions.

Alexander D Politis described how he helped develop a custom tracking system called SMART (Simultaneous Manuscript Reviewer Tracking). Careful consideration, he advised, should go into deciding whether to build your own system or buy a ready-made one. Politis suggested using the following criteria in choosing a system:

- capability and speed
- cost
- platform
- developer or vendor support
- flexibility
- ease of minor modification
- ease of training
- speed of implementation

Build a close working relationship with the developer. That requires a substantial time commitment, but it is important if you want a product that meets your needs. All speakers agreed, whether they made major modifications or minor changes to their databases. Collecting user input is

important. Ask all staff members using the system about their needs and suggestions. Finally, consider centralizing training, quality control, testing, and tracking of reviewer information by creating a database-manager position.

Dana St John Kolar selected a commercial database system, RMTS, using the following criteria:

- needs of the journal
- cost
- time needed for implementation
- expertise
- computer hardware
- number of users

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- length of time system is needed

Disadvantages of a commercial tracking system, said St John Kolar, are that you have less control and less flexibility and that technical support might be hard to get. Continuing research and development and upgrades are the main advantages. A commercial database system also saves time because consultants and developers are not needed.

Several commercial systems are available. Choose one based on your needs and budget constraints. Talk to the vendors, visit demonstrations, and talk to current users about how the system works for them, about their experience with technical support, and about anything else that would help you make a decision. Be aware of unexpected costs, such as those of staff training, new hardware needs, and transition when you change from your previous system.

The manuscript-tracking system, said Lynn Foster, is the "cornerstone of elec-

tronic processing" for production or peer review management. The choice of a manuscript-tracking system is the most important and most mission-critical decision that you will make. The capabilities and limitations of a system will affect your future choices. She added the following to the criteria suggested by previous speakers:

- Know where you're going; have the system requirements well planned before dealing with a developer.
- Be a co-developer.
- Know what you're buying.
- Keep costs in mind.
- Know who owns the code.
- Be aware of customizations and changes.
- Know what the developer already knows about your business.

Audience questions were related to system capabilities. FileMaker 4 can be used for regular tracking, with e-mail, and to generate an annual index if keywords are contributed by authors. Small changes can be made easily, but reprogramming is expensive and might not be possible at all. Therefore, planning and working closely with developers are important.

Are these systems overkill for small journals? Microsoft Access or Excel, one panelist suggested, might be just as good for a small journal. However, Politis did not think that Access would be easier to use than FileMaker Pro. Excel might be easier for setting up simple recordkeeping, but with very little additional effort FileMaker Pro or Access offers immense advantages. Commercial packages might be overkill, but Politis believes that a straightforward database system would still be an obvious choice.

Building or buying is an individual decision. If you choose to purchase a commercial system, shop around. If you decide to build your own system, select a developer carefully and work closely with that person throughout the building process. ■