

A Question of Participation

As principal author of a manuscript, you initially signed a coauthor agreement with several other authors. The manuscript was rejected by one journal, and another rejected it on first submission and first revision and requested a second revision. Most of the coauthors have been actively involved in reviewing and revising the manuscript. But one of them, a resident, having participated in data analysis and in writing an initial draft, moved to another setting and has not assisted in any of the later rewriting or response to the latest reviewers' comments. That coauthor's name appeared on the first submission to the journal that requested extensive revision. You feel that you and the other coauthors have done much more work and that the most practical and accurate way to credit that coauthor is to provide an acknowledgment. How do other authors or journal editors manage the all-too-common situation of the departure of an author who is no longer involved in the project?

Solutions

My first question is, Why has the departed resident not been involved in the later rewriting and response to reviewers' comments? That opportunity should have been provided at each step. If it has not been, the resident may feel quite out of touch with the latest version and may no longer wish to be included as a coauthor. But the resident may feel that her or his contribution remains significant and may wish to retain authorship, perhaps in a position that reflects the lessened contribution. In either case, clear communication must be established among all the original coauthors.

Speaking as both an author and an author's editor, I would say that the other coauthors must send the latest version to the departed coauthor, detail the work done on the manuscript since that coauthor last saw it, and request written permission to change the coauthor agreement. These steps are particularly impor-

tant in view of the signed agreement, which has legal contractual implications; but it applies also to fields in which signed authorship agreements are not common, simply as a matter of professional ethics and professional courtesy. A coauthor who is no longer involved in a project may still be very interested in the work and in receiving what is felt to be due credit for effort expended. And a coauthor who has left a field may return—as a potential collaborator, a grant or journal reviewer, or a section head. A well-defined revised agreement, including the reasons for the revision, could avert misunderstanding, maintain collegiality, and prevent repercussions.

If the departed coauthor cannot be reached or refuses to be removed, the existing agreement probably must stand as a legal contract; legal counsel should be sought even for an oral contract. If the agreement stands, possibly the contribution of each coauthor could be described in a footnote, as is routinely done in a few journals. The easiest solution, of course, would have been to maintain clear and frequent communication throughout the submission and revision process.

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There is a natural human tendency to accept the illusion of "out of sight, out of mind". There is a second human tendency to accept the illusion that the most recent work required a lot more effort than previous work. However, when it comes to authorship the issue is not who did the most work, but rather whether the proposed coauthor has made a significant contribution. A person whose contributions are significant should be a coauthor even if not immediately available. The person in question was involved in the data analysis. If that analysis still stands and is important

to the work, that person clearly should be a coauthor, whether there or 10,000 miles away. Finally, if there is any question about whether someone should be a coauthor, that person should be asked. If we are going to be collaborative human beings, we need to respect and trust each other's judgment about such matters. After all, in a multiauthor collaborative paper, every coauthor has ownership.

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[One respondent suggests a more specific scenario, "Whose manuscript is this?"]

A resident proposed to his adviser a research study of their patients. They both acted on the resident's proposal and started the study. To conduct the study, they did a biochemical analysis of serum samples from patients diagnosed and followed up in their department. They prepared the manuscript with two other coauthors. All four were involved in the study, but most of the manuscript work was done by the resident and his adviser. The other coauthors helped with patient follow-up and sample collection; they also reviewed and revised the manuscript prepared by their colleagues. The coauthors on the first version of the manuscript appeared as follows: Resident, Adviser, Coauthor 1, Coauthor 2. The initial manuscript was rejected by one journal. Resident transferred to another institution at this stage. Adviser and Coauthor 1 revised the manuscript and sent it to another journal. The second journal accepted the article after major revisions, prepared mainly by Coauthor 1 and Adviser; Coauthor 2 did check their revisions. Resident was not involved in this last version.

How should the coauthors appear in

the journal? Should Resident be excluded from the final version?

Solution:

The contribution of each coauthor was scored according to the work done at different steps, as follows. 0 = no contribution; + = minimal contribution; ++ = moderate contribution; +++ = significant contribution; ++++ = major contribution.

Who was/were the principal investigator(s) who suggested the project?

Resident	+++
Adviser	++++
Coauthor 1	0
Coauthor 2	0

Who conducted the study?

Resident	+++
Adviser	+++
Coauthor 1	++
Coauthor 2	++

How much were they involved in the preparation of the first version submitted to the first journal?

Resident	++
Adviser	+++
Coauthor 1	+++
Coauthor 2	+

How much were they involved in preparation of the last version accepted by the second journal?

Resident	0
Adviser	++
Coauthor 1	++++
Coauthor 2	++

Total scores (the sum of positive signs):

Resident:	8
Adviser:	12
Coauthor 1:	9
Coauthor 2:	5

Final position of the coauthors on the manuscript: Adviser, Coauthor 1, Resident, Coauthor 2.

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I believe that the first step is to discuss the matter with the departed resident, who might agree with reducing the credit from coauthor to acknowledgment. The departed resident did participate in getting the manuscript to the first submission. Unless the coauthor agreement required coauthors to participate in making revisions and imposed consequences if they did not, then the departed resident still deserves to remain as coauthor. Reducing the credit against the wishes of the departed resident might entitle the principal author to a heaping of ingratitude and might subject the principal author and remaining coauthors to legal action.

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New Question: A Question of Internal Validity

The author of a prospective journal article in draft form asks you, the manager of an editorial group, whether you have anyone who can advise him on what statistical tests to use in analyzing his data before he writes his final paper. He also wants assistance in writing the final paper. Can your manuscript editors complete this project? What external resources might you consider consulting? Will you want to see a final draft before starting the editing process? In other words, at what stage of manuscript preparation will you accept a manuscript for editing, and how far do you go? 

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