

THE ELECTRONIC *Manuscript Submission and Tracking: Current Workflow and Online Solutions*

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It's an old saw that the devil is in the details, and it's true. How does a manuscript, or an issue, get published? The promise of the Internet and digital workflow is that the path will become easier to travel. But adopting an online manuscript tracking and submission system requires research and planning. Of special importance is understanding current workflow, developing a file-format submission strategy, and determining how to integrate the tracking system into the business side of the publishing process.

Bill Witscher began the session by describing how to evaluate the workflow for customers in search of an online manuscript tracking and submission sys-

tem. This time-intensive process includes several questionnaires that are filled out by the customer to describe current workflow and to identify problems. Then a consultant visits the customer for 1 to 2 days to see the process in action and to flesh out the roles and queues that it comprises. The consultant's goals are to help the journal office critically examine and refine processes in place and to gather enough information for the program developer to create a system that works for the journal. By following that plan, customers take an active role in designing a system that suits their way of working.

Next, William T Carden Jr discussed developing a file-format strategy. The paper submission system accommodated anything printed on paper, but a digital submission system might need limits. The journal office must decide how flexible it can afford to be in providing technical support and paying for necessary manipulations of files after acceptance.

The computer literacy of the authors and reviewers, the types of files that authors create, whether authors produce multimedia files, how reviewers work with supplied content, and whether participants have other special needs are basic questions. Customers must determine how files will be used (production? licensing? digital object identifiers? rapid publication? archiving?). What requirements do other users—such as the printer, the online provider, the copyeditor, the indexer, and the content aggregator—have? Once the answers have been marshaled, customers can determine what is acceptable and what is not. These guidelines can be used to solicit outside assistance. By including these requirements, customers can ensure that the solution provider focuses on their

needs and that all proposals address the same requirements.

In Carden's experience, authors "want to do it their way", and they expect quality to remain the same no matter how a file is manipulated. Happily, it's becoming easier to convert files from one format to another, and new tools are coming to market all the time. Also, the PDF file format is easy for most authors to create, and authors and reviewers like it. If peer review is the "end of the line", a PDF will probably do; but if you want to use files beyond peer review, a source file is needed. No matter what file-submission criteria you adopt, a strong technical support staff with adequate education and training is a key to success.

Julian Macnamara rounded off the session by addressing how a manuscript tracking system fits into the whole of a business's operations and the advantages that its implementation can reap. He discussed how a system can be leveraged by the accounting staff, the printing staff, and reviewers so that redundancy is eliminated and efficiency is increased.

We were advised to review our workflow and consider how collected data could benefit others we work with while remembering scalability, ability of the new system to get data from current systems, system interoperability, and the quality of documentation and training that will accompany the new system.

During the question-and-answer period, it was noted that customers should plan for continued maintenance and changes to a system once it has been implemented and, for those on limited budgets who are frightened by the cost of such tailored systems, that planning and workflow analysis are first steps toward a future with online manuscript tracking. 