

THE EDITORIAL OFFICE

The Editorial Office Ain't What It Used To Be

Moderator:

Rich Dodenhoff

American Society for Pharmacology
and Experimental Therapeutics
Bethesda, Maryland

Panelists:

Barbara Gordon

American Society for Biochemistry
and Molecular Biology
Bethesda, Maryland

Aime Ballard

American Diabetes Association
Alexandria, Virginia

Ann Donaldson

American Journal of Sports Medicine
Charlottesville, Virginia

Reporter:

Jennifer Douglas

Canadian Medical Association Journal
Ottawa, Ontario

The panelists in this session discussed the benefits and headaches associated with introducing new technologies to the editorial office.

Barbara Gordon, deputy executive officer of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, described the implementation of an online submission and peer-review system for the *Journal of Biological Chemistry (JBC)*. JBC staffers started developing the system in house in 1997; in July 1999, they began to offer online submission to authors. JBC authors were quick to adopt the new system: 20% of manuscripts were submitted electronically by September 1999, and 100% of the journal's 13,000 submissions/year are now submitted online.

Some benefits of online submission

and peer review at JBC have been a dramatic improvement in turnaround time, improved interaction between editors and authors, increased submissions, a broadened reviewer pool, decreased courier and stationery costs, and decreased administrative staff (four staffers who left JBC have not been replaced).

Although the results have been good for JBC, Gordon cautioned that implementing such a system requires a lot of "back end" work: JBC abandoned its previous practices and started from scratch. She advised holding regular staff meetings to communicate where the journal is going and to provide opportunities for the staff to raise concerns. Editorial assistants at JBC had to be reassured that although many of their former duties, such as stamping and filing hard copies, were disappearing, they had opportunities to learn new skills, such as providing technical support to authors and performing some copyediting duties.

Aime Ballard, managing editor of professional journals for the American Diabetes Association, discussed telecommuting, noting that the best jobs for telecommuting are ones with well-defined tasks, no supervisory responsibilities, and little need for face-to-face interaction with colleagues. She said that good candidates for telework are employees who are trained to the point of requiring little supervision, are well organized, and are self-motivated enough to handle the distractions at home. They have strong communication skills and are proficient in the use of the technologies that they will use at home.

Ballard recommended that organizations establish a telecommuting policy before starting to negotiate with individual employees. The employer and employee should negotiate a trial period and define which days of the week the employee

will be at the office. Acceptable delays in returning phone and e-mail messages should be defined, as should the working hours during which the employee must be reachable and productivity expectations. The employer and employee should also negotiate the extent to which the employer will supply equipment and technical support for the home office. Ballard emphasized that communication and flexibility on both sides are key to successful telecommuting arrangements.

Ann Donaldson, managing editor of the *American Journal of Sports Medicine*, described the challenges of managing a journal with three full-time staffers and two freelance copyeditors spread across four locations. She left the journal's main office in Boston and now manages the journal by telecommuting from Virginia. On four occasions, she has returned to the main office for 3-4 months to hire and train new staffers; at one point, she had to put in 12- to 14-hour days to compensate for an employee who left after performing very poorly. She mentioned lack of personal contact and feelings of isolation as disadvantages of telecommuting; she offsets these by keeping people informed about what's happening so that they feel like part of the team. She sends flowers to the journal's freelance copyeditors at Christmas and to the full-time staffers on the anniversary of their hiring. She monitors the performance of the copyeditors by having them fill in a log sheet for each manuscript with the "level of edit", number of hours to complete the editing, number of manuscript pages, and number of figures. To manage telecommuters successfully, Donaldson said, you have to know your staff and trust them. 