

Fending Off the Alligators: Tips and Techniques for the Small Publication Office

Panelists:

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"If you're up to your neck in alligators, it's hard to remember that your task was to drain the swamp!" So noted Johanna Reinhart, journals director for the American Society of Civil Engineers, as she launched a lively discussion of problem-solving tips for the small publication office. Vicki Sullivan, production manager at Impressions Book and Journal Services, was coleader of the conversation focused on vexing situations and creative solutions from the audience's experiences. Their own advice came first: Stay focused on the task when everything seems to be falling apart, and keep moving, no matter what happens.

Retaining Good Staff

The problem: When staff is spread thin, little time or opportunity may be available for training or exploring more interesting duties. Career paths may be limited or unclear, pay may be low, and incentive to stay may be lacking. The result is high turnover or disgruntled and ineffective employees.

The tips: Test applicants for skills required to do the job. Have training materials and plans in place so that you can train new

employees quickly and thoroughly. If you have a position with little or no promotion potential, consider contracting out to someone who can work from home or hiring a mature person who isn't looking for long-term career advancement. Even if people can't advance in the company, keep them interested in the job by offering opportunities to learn new skills and incentives to develop new ways to do business.

Ensuring Coordination and Consistency

The problem: Whether a publication enterprise has a few editors sitting together in one room or dozens scattered across the country, it can be hard to make sure everyone is on the same page about house styles, policies, and procedures.

The tips: To keep people literally reading from the same book, order a bulk subscription to a publication that explores editorial issues and practices, such as *Science Editor*. Offer cross training or centralized training sessions to provide everyone with common information, experience, and personal "bonding time". If your editors are scattered, consider providing a crew of assistant editors in a central location, serving everyone with a consistent house style. Or hire one person whose sole responsibility is to oversee and coordinate geographically distant editors to ensure consistency.

Handling Workflow and Turnaround Time

The problem: The staff of a small office is more likely to feel the burden of too much work at once, or too little, when work does not flow evenly throughout the year. Turnaround time can fluctuate accordingly: In quieter periods more hands are available to get papers quickly to and from peer review, edited, and published; and the

effect is the opposite when a few editors are juggling too many projects.

The tips: When work is heavy, contract out; when the load lifts, use down time to organize and plan. Let clients know when you expect a lull, and offer better turnaround time if they submit then. To encourage quick turnaround by reviewers, try reporting at your annual meeting who took the most and least time to return quality reviews, or issue a monthly late list of laggard reviewers.

Improving Communication

The problem: Clear and credible communication is ever more critical in a small publication office. Many of the other situations discussed during the session have their roots in communication.

The tips: Keep talking! Don't just rely on the water cooler—have regular staff meetings, calls, and conversations, even if they have to be video or conference calls to include "remote" folks. Use e-mail, internal listservs, chat rooms, or other electronic services. Provide training sessions in conflict resolution, team building, and communication. Have feedback and appraisal sessions.

From a Croak to a Song

"Most offices hope they will sing", acknowledged Reinhart and Sullivan during this provocative session, "but they often end up with a chorus of croaks." The tips and techniques shared during this session (only a few of which are captured above) offer a fine start to tuning up the choir in any publication office, large or small. 