Solution Corner

edited by Barbara Gastel

A Question of Retention

An editor of a small journal has been keeping paper copies, electronic copies, or both of manuscripts, editorial correspondence, page proofs, and other items related to the journal. Now, after several years, her file cabinets and electronic files are bulging. She thinks some streamlining might be in order. How should she proceed?

Solutions

Journals are advised to hold copyright releases and other legal protections for 3 years after print publication and 5 years after electronic publication. Thus, the editorial staff can start pruning the files accordingly.

Our journal switched to an online system of submission and peer review in May 2004. The large file cabinet previously devoted to active manuscripts is now nearly empty and will be put to another use. We're scanning the important documents associated with the published manuscripts of the last 5 years and discarding the hard copies. We're more ruthless about proofs and editorial correspondence, saving only the last set of proofs and communications that affect content. And if we don't need to refer to any of these materials within 5 years of publication, we will discard them.

If switching to an online system of submission and review is not feasible for this journal, then the editors and staff need to look at where the paper is being created and how it can be eliminated without compromising the editorial process. For example, some years ago, we asked reviewers to stop writing their comments on the manuscript pages but instead to list them sequentially. Not only did reviewers not have to mail back all those manuscript pages, but the editors and authors didn't need to sift through them, and we didn't have to store them. Yet all the comments were readily accessible, which streamlined the process for everyone.

The editors and staff of this journal should critically review each of their procedures and determine where and how they can simplify the handling of manuscripts. Asking authors and reviewers for suggestions may also be helpful.

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I am a pack rat by nature, and my editor-in-chief was an even worse hoarder, so when I started telecommuting I had to make room in my home office for the accumulated detritus of 25 years on the job. Buying a bigger house was not an option, so the only alternative was to consolidate.

Thank goodness for CDs! With a 700-MB capacity, CDs can accommodate multiple published manuscripts in electronic form. The archiving process is straightforward and fast with CD-burning software like Roxio's Easy CD Creator. As for page proofs, artwork, correspondence with authors, designers, or reviewers, and other incidentals, much of it will be digital already—for example, as e-mail and PDFs—and can be saved with the manuscript. Paper files must be scanned into your hard drive before you transfer them to CD, an extra step. Or you may want to consider disposing of supporting documents after some period, say, 24 months from publication. Even the IRS does not require you to keep records forever.

A complete issue of our publication fits handily on one CD, and each CD is devoted to a single issue regardless of how much empty space is left on it. Make sure you label the CD (use the software included with your CD burner or supplied by the CD-label manufacturer), and for about 69 cents you'll have freed 6+ inches of filing-cabinet space. Finally, don't forget to recycle all that paper, which will make you feel good about the environment and spur you on to declutter your life.

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A similar question appeared recently on the listserv of the World Association of Medical Editors. According to editors' responses, the time for keeping submitted manuscripts on file ranged from 6 months to 2 years. Rejected manuscripts were kept longer than accepted manuscripts.

Electronic submission of manuscripts changed that practice, so space is not an issue for some editors any more: The records can be kept forever. Other editors, despite the availability of electronic manuscript archives, still keep both paper and electronic copy for the same amount of time. Some journals also keep the full paper copy of the manuscript, whereas others keep only the first page of the manuscript, full correspondence with the author, and all editorial records.

So there is no single answer to the question—you will have to decide on your own policy of archiving manuscripts. It will probably depend on the number of submissions, preacceptance and postacceptance processing time, number of appeals, and other factors. Whatever you decide, make it known to your authors in the guidelines for authors and, most important, stick to your policy.

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New Question: A Question of Multiplicity

Groundwork for the eighth edition of a multiauthor technical book will soon begin. In updating the nearly 120 chapters from edition to edition, authors have tended to add but not delete references. Many chapters now have about 100 references, and one has several hundred. An editor associated with the project perceives that some of the reference lists might be becoming excessive but is unsure how to proceed. What do you advise?