

# Mentorship at a Small Scientific Journal: The Case of JALA

**Nan Hallock**

Peer-reviewed scientific journals of all sizes recognize and respect the same general publishing processes and procedures. Large journals often make international headlines, but small journals can have an impact at many levels on the mission and goals of the organizations they represent. The *Journal of the Association for Laboratory Automation (JALA)* is one such journal.

The JALA Editorial Board and staff have high regard for scientific-journal publishing proprieties. They also recognize that, as one of the most visible and valuable benefits of membership in the Association for Laboratory Automation (ALA), JALA has potential not limited to the delivery of what is printed on its pages.

## The JALA Spirit of Mentorship

Unlike large journals, small journals typically do not have acceptance rates as low as 6% to 8%. Higher acceptance rates, however, do not automatically translate into a lack of scientific integrity.

Because education is the cornerstone of ALA, the JALA peer-review process thrives on a spirit of mentorship, not judgment. It speaks to ALA's mission and goals by serving as a professional-development opportunity. Seasoned veterans offer manuscript advice and guidance, and interested young professionals willing to invest the necessary time and effort benefit from their coaching. They appreciate the professional insight and consider the process an opportunity to improve the presentation of their work—work that, in many cases, eventually does end up in print.

James Sterling is a professor at the Keck Graduate Institute of Applied Life Sciences in Claremont, California, and a

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NAN HALLOCK is managing editor of the *Journal of the Association for Laboratory Automation*.

member of the JALA Editorial Board. He says that the “JALA Spirit of Mentorship is helpful to scientists and engineers who work on interdisciplinary projects that do not produce results that fall along traditional academic disciplinary lines.” As an educator, he highly values “the opportunities it provides to students and less experienced authors. It requires commitment and patience from the JALA editors and peer

“... our process is as  
valuable as our product.”

reviewers, who must be willing to consider the potential for articles that are initially not suitable for publication; ultimately, that commitment pays off in a variety of ways to a variety of stakeholders.”

One young author, Peyman Najmabadi, of the University of Toronto, adds that he has “benefited a lot academically from the constructive comments of JALA's reviewers. They played a mentorship role in addition to being critical of the technical content and presentation style of my papers. They provided much more assistance than I ever expected. This approach requires a lot more effort compared with conventional acceptance or rejection decisions. I'm sure it's challenging to recruit dedicated professionals who are willing to spend this kind of time with prospective authors. I am very appreciative that JALA has dedicated itself to educating authors like this. It is an invaluable decision by JALA, and I hope to see more journals adopt this same review approach.”

The JALA Spirit of Mentorship declaration was published in JALA in August 2005 and is available on the ALA Web site, at [labautomation.org/jalamentorship.php](http://labautomation.org/jalamentorship.php).

## Quality and Quantity

In 2005, JALA initially returned 95% of submitted manuscripts to their authors as unacceptable for publication. After one, two, or even three rounds of peer review and author revisions, 75% of the 95% were eventually accepted and published.

JALA's relatively high manuscript-acceptance rate has not reduced its value. According to a 2005 JALA readership study by Readex Research, what is published in JALA is highly regarded by readers.

The typical JALA reader has been reading JALA for 3 of its 7 years, has read or looked through all four of the last four issues, and spends 47 minutes with a typical issue. On the average, JALA readers refer to a typical issue twice, and 87% regularly read at least one of JALA's features or departments. Some 37% share their issues with others, 93% save their issues, and 35% save them for 2 years or longer.

JALA also prompts reader response. In the last 12 months, 87% have taken action at least once as a result of reading articles or columns, and 65% have taken action at least once as a result of reading advertisements. Of the 20 competing journals asked about, none is read by more than half of JALA readers.

## Incentives and Rewards

Unlike the readers of many other journals, most JALA readers represent commercial and government entities, not academe. As a result, it is not particularly important to JALA readers' careers to write scientific papers or articles: 28% of respondents to the 2005 study indicated that it is important to publish, compared with 47% who indicated that it is not. Therefore, JALA must create incentives for authors to share their work. The mentorship offered by the peer-review process is attractive, and other incentives focus on recognition and rewards.

Active peer networking is a fundamental reason why many people belong to associations and professional societies. As an organization rooted in volunteerism, ALA does not pay cash for *JALA* contributions. Instead, it creates incentives for authors and rewards them with exclusive visibility and networking opportunities.

The annual LabAutomation conference becomes the stage for much of that recognition. The event takes place in January each year, and attendees who wrote manuscripts during the previous year receive “*JALA* Author” ribbons for their conference name badges. In addition, the names of all authors and peer reviewers are published in the December issue of *JALA*, which is distributed to all conference attendees, including exhibit-hall walk-in visitors.

The LabAutomation exhibit hall is a lively center of conference activity and the site of three major early-evening receptions: the opening and closing receptions and, between them, the “Reception Celebrating *JALA* Authors”, a big bash that is open to all conference attendees, who happily gather for the free hors d’oeuvres, beer, wine, and soft drinks. To mark the occasion, special signs are displayed throughout the exhibit hall, featuring *JALA*’s distinctive cover design and the names of all the previous year’s authors. In addition, the executive editor and managing editor are available in the ALA Member Center booth to greet past and prospective authors and peer reviewers.

It is also during the reception that the winner of the *JALA* Reader’s Choice Award is unveiled. The award recognizes the author or authors whose manuscript attracted the greatest number of page views on *JALA* Online at the end of the preceding year. Copies of the winning manuscript are distributed via the ALA Member Center booth for the duration of the conference and prominently posted on the ALA Web site. Each author of the winning manuscript receives a full-color custom certificate in a handsome frame and a generous selection of *JALA* and ALA merchandise.

### About *JALA*

*JALA* is the official, peer-reviewed journal of the Association for Laboratory Automation (ALA). It is a multidisciplinary international forum devoted to the advancement of technology in the laboratory.

*JALA* readers are primarily ALA members. They are commercial, government, and academic researchers; scientists; and engineers who conduct research and develop new technologies to increase productivity, increase experimental-data quality, reduce labo-

ratory-process cycle times, or enable experimentation that otherwise would be impossible.

*JALA* is published six times a year by ALA in partnership with Elsevier. Circulation is about 1,000—with about two-thirds in the United States and one-third in Europe. *JALA* is indexed by *Chemical Abstracts*, *Analytical Abstracts*, *CINAHL*, *EMBASE Excerpta Medica*, and *Elsevier ScienceDirect*.

For more information, visit [labautomation.org](http://labautomation.org).

On the last night of the conference, *JALA* hosts a private, invitation-only VIP reception for the previous year’s authors, peer reviewers, *JALA* Editorial Board members, ALA board members, and ALA staff. This exclusive gathering offers free hors d’oeuvres, an open bar, music, door prizes, and an opportunity for young professionals to meet experienced (one might even say famous) leaders of the organization.

For those intrigued by such events, a Workshop for Prospective *JALA* Authors is conducted during the conference to walk through the process of preparing and submitting a manuscript for *JALA*’s consideration.

Throughout the year, *JALA* takes special care to let its authors know how much their efforts are appreciated. On publication, each corresponding author receives a thank-you package that includes a thank-you card, a copy of the journal for each coauthor, and a gift or gifts, which have included *JALA* pens, book lights, CD cleaners, letter openers, retractable badge holders, and tote bags.

When the editorial office receives online traffic reports, authors whose manuscripts ranked in the top 10 in page views receive congratulatory e-mails. Feedback from the e-mails is consistently outstanding. Authors are excited and energized, and they forward the messages to everyone they know and pledge to submit more manuscripts.

### Impact

*JALA* began conducting postproduction surveys of its authors in 2004; by the middle of 2006, 93.75% of authors who responded said that they were “very satisfied” with their *JALA* publishing experience. *JALA* manuscript submissions, subscriptions, online viewership, and reader satisfaction have steadily increased since the adoption of the *JALA* Spirit of Mentorship and the related incentive and reward initiatives. According to *JALA* Executive Editor Mark F Russo, “We are growing at a steady pace, but more important, we are faithfully serving a unique professional niche. We are an integral part of our association’s mission and goals, and we remain dedicated to ensuring that our process is as valuable as our product.” 