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## How to find, grow and retain good reviewers: An experience from Pakistan

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### Abstract

Despite criticism and allegations of suppressing innovative ideas, Peer Review is widely cited as central in evaluation of manuscripts submitted to journals for publication. Peer Reviewers along with editors who are known as gatekeepers help improve the quality of the manuscripts. One of the primary responsibilities of the Editor is considered to create and maintain a high quality productive group of reviewers. In order to retain good reviewers, it is essential to give them due respect, recognize their services, refrain from over burdening the good reviewers, have some CME Credit for this activity, look at different ways of rewarding the reviewers i.e. providing good reading material, books, appreciation certificates, post review thanks letters besides elevating the good efficient reviewers to the Editorial Board. Publishing their name at the end of the year, concession in publication charges if they are authors or co-authors in manuscripts received for publication besides awarding distinguished reviewers are some of the measures that can prove fruitful.

**Keywords:** Good Peer Reviewers, Recognition, Appreciation.

Peer Review is considered a central activity in increasing quality of manuscript. In fact, peer review is a poorly understood process under intense scrutiny and controversy. Peer reviewer is a person who assesses the merit of a manuscript submitted for publication to a journal. Peer Reviewers and Editors are also known as gatekeepers who evaluate the quality of manuscripts submitted to biomedical journals for publications to ensure that only authentic and correct information is passed on to the reader. Despite the fact that Peer Review is widely cited as central in evaluation of the manuscripts, many scholars have expressed their concern about the effectiveness of peer review saying that it has a tendency to suppress innovative findings. (Lamont, 2009; Kassirer & Campion, 1994; Mahoney, 1977; Heroin, 1990). However, it is generally believed that peer reviewers add quality to the manuscripts.

Most of the editors of biomedical journals with large submissions usually first do an initial internal review and do not accept those manuscripts with major deficiencies or those which do not interest their readers or are not related to the fields or disciplines of medicine

which their journal covers. This does not mean that they are not of good quality and many of these eventually do get accepted and published in other journals. However, this saves the busy editors and reviewers time so that they concentrate on the selected few manuscripts that are initially accepted for further processing and external peer review. Even at this stage, some of the manuscripts first accepted for further processing can be desk rejected. These Desk rejections are the manuscripts that the editor decides not to send for peer review after an initial internal evaluation. This also enables the authors to submit their manuscript to some other journals. Most of the peer reviewers learn this trade like apprentices (Rennie, 1999).

Some associations and medical journals also run hands on workshops for training the peer reviewers. BMJ for example which has an excellent team of peer reviewers ran a training programme for peer reviewers besides publishing lot of useful information in a package for learning at [http://bmj.com/advice/peer review/](http://bmj.com/advice/peer%20review/). Training is also considered essential to retain good reviewers. Pakistan Association of Medical Editors (PAME) in Pakistan has been running such Hands on Workshops for training the reviewers that were found quite useful by the participants in improving their skills.

Good reviewing is often considered a thankless job that takes lot of time and efforts to do a good review since most of the biomedical journals do not pay to the reviewers who all do this as an honorary job. Studies have shown that best reviewers are young under forty years of age, trained in epidemiology or statistics, are affiliated with academic institutions and a vast majority of them usually live in North America. (Rennie, 1999)

Editors of biomedical journals particularly those in the developing countries face lot of pressure and hardships. Editing a good quality peer review journal under financial and manpower constraints is a very stressful and frustrating job and all this has now been very well documented. (Jawaid, 2004; Jawaid, 2008). Quality of a journal depends on its editorial board and the team of reviewers who selects good quality of research submitted for publication based on their judgment. One of the important problems faced by the editors is how to find, grow and retain good reviewers. The primary responsibility of the Editor is considered to be to create and maintain a high quality productive group of editorial team and reviewers who are willing to work within the journal's guidelines. (Caellegh, Shea & Penn, 2001).

Journals without any quality control and a good peer review system in place are considered destructive particularly for countries in the developing world where most of the government departments and medical institutions are full of people with bogus or questionable scientific credentials. It has also been observed that most of the online only open access journals have very little or no scrutiny at all. With the advances in information technology and automation in scientific publishing, many journals use different software's like Editorial Manager, Scholar One etc., which are also used for selecting peer reviewers but one should never depend on these software's all the time because peer review environment has been polluted by some people with vested interests. It also became evident when SAGE a leading international publisher of journals, books and digital media

for academics, educational and professional markets had to retract sixty articles that were implicated in a peer review and citation ring at the Journal of Vibration and Control. (COPE Digest, 2014).

**Peer Review Systems:** Most of the medical journals use double blind peer review system wherein neither the author nor the reviewer's identity is disclosed. However, Open Peer Review is the latest and the best and it is considered to improve the quality of Reviews. Since the reviewers know that their identity will be disclosed, they are more careful in their comments. We in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences opted for Open Peer Review System in 2005, we have had no problems, and it is working quite effectively.

**Reviewers Database:** All these things were kept in mind while we in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences decided to have a Reviewers Database consisting of experts in different disciplines of medicine not only from all over Pakistan but from the region and the developed world.

**Types of Reviewers:** It depends on geographical scope of the journal, if it is an official publication affiliated with a university or other institutions, aims and scope of the journal. Those with a poor track record of publications, close relations with a rival journal or those academicians who are personally known to be unreliable or "Nasty" should never be invited to join the reviewer's database.

**Selection of Reviewers:** One can look at the published manuscripts in various journals, Directory of professional societies and associations besides contacting speakers at the conferences. Yet another useful source is the authors who have published a few papers in the journal and their manuscripts have been found of good quality. The authors who are invited to join the reviewer's database feel delighted and usually do a good job with proper encouragement.

**Soliciting potential Reviewers:** One can contact them personally, send them an e-mail or letters. It is important constantly add reviewers to the database. Some statisticians or those who have qualifications or training in epidemiology or statistics should also be selected as they are quite useful when many reviewers are unable to check the statistical analysis and suggest this to be looked at by some statistician.

**Qualifications of Reviewers:** It is important that they have minimum professional qualifications and also have an academic aptitude. As pointed out earlier, young reviewers most often do a good job and are also found more efficient and particularly those who are affiliated with academic institutions most often do a better job.

**Categorization of Reviewer:** Reviewers can be categorized as Excellent, Good, Not so Good reviewers. The excellent reviewers will not only look at the scientific contents but will also improve English language, Grammars besides have a careful look at the references as well. They do not mind doing extensive editing to improve the manuscripts. Good Reviewers are those who will just look at the scientific contents and leave the rest for the Editors while not so Good Reviewers are those who can be relied upon just for the scientific contents and the Editors will themselves have to do the copy editing besides correcting the references.

**Reviewing the Reviewers:** Editors should always edit the reviewer's comments before they are forwarded to the authors. Unreliable, nasty comments if any should be eliminated. Based on the reviewer's performance, the editors must keep on including and excluding the reviewers that means constant updating the reviewer's database keeping in view the performance of the reviewers. It is also important that the editors should ensure that the reviewer's comments are constructive and help authors to improve their manuscripts. The editors are also required to have an oversight on their deputies in the editorial team.

### How to Retain Good Reviewers

1. Retaining good reviewers is a challenge for the editors. Hence, it is important that the reviewer's services must be recognized.

2. Refrain from over burdening the good reviewers. Generally, there is a tendency to send more manuscripts to those reviewers who do a quick efficient job. It can backfire and the reviewers if overburdened might show burn out syndromes and then refuse to review manuscripts.

3. Make sure that the manuscript is of interest to the reviewer.

4. Arrange some CME Credits for this activity that the reviewers can use in the academic career advancement.

5. Look at different ways of rewarding the Reviewers. Financial rewards always do not work. Appreciation certificates, acknowledgement of their services and its publication in the journal at the end of the Year are a good example. Providing complimentary copies of the journal, passing on some good reading material, books, training the reviewers at Workshops, having a social get-together from time to time inviting the reviewers, giving them due respect and appropriate recognition, concession in publication charges if they submit their own manuscripts for publication or if they are one of the co- authors in a manuscript submitted for publication. Elevating and appointing Good Reviewers to the Editorial Board is yet another useful way of recognizing their competence and expertise.

6. Send a courteous letter while submitting a manuscript for review, followed by post review thanks letter, e-mail, and awarding some of the distinguished Reviewers.

7. Once the journal has achieved some distinction and credibility; many scholars are keen to join the Reviewer's Data Base or Editorial Board of these journals. They apply and show their willingness offering their services as association with a journal is an honour and prestige. We have been receiving such requests on regular basis. They are first included on trial basis and those who do a good review on time are then added to the Reviewer's Data Base.

Over the years we have used all the above to create a comprehensive Reviewers Data Base which now has over three hundred Reviewers from Pakistan, from countries in this Region as well as from the Developed World. Reviewers selected from amongst the authors whose manuscripts were published in the journal after peer review and were rated of high quality by the external reviewers can prove a very useful resource.

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