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# TOP 5 BEST PRACTICES FOR ADVANCING YOUR EDITORIAL OFFICE

A REPORT FOR SCHOLARLY PUBLISHERS

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**Peer review is the keystone of the scholarly publication process** and what was once a closed, slow, and laborious morass of postal letters, faxes, and localized knowledge has been dramatically improved by substantial innovations in electronic communication. The emergence of online peer review management systems led to new possibilities for accessibility and timeliness. Adopting this technology is the first step to expanding authorship, reducing the burden on reviewers, and shortening publication time. But simply having an online system alone is not enough to ensure real, lasting improvements.

**“The publishing industry’s business models had to change. As it stood, the model cost journals a lot of money and a lot of time. Online management tools have flipped the industry on its head.”**

–Taylor Bowen, Founder and President, Aegis

Many journals move their peer review online to make communication easier and information more accessible. But today’s online systems can offer so much more. Now, online peer review systems provide ways to not only streamline the old paper process, but to integrate a multitude of related tasks and value-added features that really change and improve the submission and review process. These additional capabilities are what make online peer review systems valuable and influential in the long-term strategic direction of a journal. As Bowen says, “If you aren’t using an automated process at its fullest potential, you’re behind.”

The truth is that many systems offer similar features and functionality. The real differentiator between systems often comes from the relationship you have with your provider. There is a significant difference between a software expert and an industry expert. When it comes to peer review management systems, you want to make sure you select both a provider and an advisor. One that can help you identify new ways to gain a competitive advantage, instead of simply managing the administrative process.

Best practices to consider as you use your peer review system to advance your editorial office:

1. Be a champion for your authors and reviewers
2. Tailor your system to suit your unique needs
3. Don't waste time and money by simply replicating your old procedures
4. Focus on improving your publications and editorial strategy, instead of managing a process
5. Select a trusted partner, not just a vendor

## 1 • Be A Champion For Your Authors And Reviewers

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**“Without authors, you have no journal. Sounds simple but it’s important to remember that when managing your submission and review process.”**

— Elizabeth Blalock, Managing Editor, *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*

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Building and maintaining rapport with your authors is key to the success of your journal. There are several ways to support those relationships during the peer review process. First, use a simple, easy-to-use, online submission and review system and provide comprehensive support throughout the process.

That starts with effectively communicating with your authors. Ensure you keep them updated – use the status features of the site and automated emails effectively to communicate key information about the progress of their manuscript through the process

With research and publishing becoming increasingly international, a “hybrid” site —one that employs a dual-language interface — can ensure your staff, authors, and reviewers are able to easily understand and navigate the submission and review process. To further support global submissions, particularly from non-native English speaking authors, it often means helping them clean-up manuscripts prior to submission. Instead of spending precious time cleaning up a submission or being forced to reject what may be very good science through language issues, look for a system that provides links to pre-submission language editing services (there are now several companies providing these services). This initial edit will ensure spelling and grammar are correct, the tone is accurate, and remove any confusing language and allow editors and reviews to concentrate on the content. This helps you capitalize on the latest research from around the globe without compromising your editorial office’s time and resources.

Authors whose research is funded by the National Institutes for Health (NIH), or other organizations with public access mandates, face extra challenges in ensuring they meet that mandate and deposit their manuscript into PubMed Central in a timely fashion. To help them manage the varying embargo periods and comply with the NIH Manuscript Submission (NIHMS) system requirements, it’s helpful to have a system that deposits their accepted manuscript for them and ensures their public access requirement after the appropriate embargo period is met.

Once a manuscript proceeds to editorial review, the burden of checking references falls to reviewers and editors. Implementing an online system that integrates with resources like *Web of Science*<sup>SM</sup> and PubMed helps them verify citations, related records, and links — making the review process easier, more comprehensive, and more efficient.

By ensuring a short span of time between submission, review, feedback and ultimate decisions, you’re helping to maintain strong, collaborative relationships with authors and reviewers. Authors value a quick response and will be encouraged to submit again in future and become reviewers for others. This can create a virtuous circle of improvement both for the publication and its authors.

## 2 • Tailor your system to suit your unique needs

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**“When deciding what features to incorporate into your workflow, two other steps are important – documenting the existing process and understanding expectations and your operating/competitive environment.”**

– Cheryl Shanks, President, SalientContent, LLC and Former Vice President, Editorial Office Operations, American Chemical Society

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How do manuscripts flow through your publication process? It’s imperative to ensure the workflow you’re using meets not only your needs as a publisher, but also the needs of your authors, reviewers, and editors. Do not be afraid to take a critical look at processes and workflows, consider every step, and make changes where necessary. Jason Roberts, managing editor of Headache, has found that journals open to an audit have benefited by changing their model based on an outsider’s objective perspective. Audits are designed to identify any portion of your journal’s workflow that takes unnecessary time and wastes money, as well as point toward your editorial office’s own “best practices.”

Often it is small changes, uncovered through the auditing process, that have the greatest impact. For instance, Roberts suggests changing to an “invitation” workflow model as a great way to cut down the time it takes for a manuscript to be assigned to a reviewer. Instead of directly assigning a reviewer, offer potential reviewers the ability to “opt-in” to the process, removing the wait for reviewers who are unwilling or unable to participate. This simple strategy saves an editor at your journal hours of time searching for interested reviewers.

Once you feel confident in your process, you can identify an online management system that has multiple capabilities and can cater to your journal’s particular needs.

For example, do revised manuscripts need to go through all the same steps as an original submission? Typically a revised manuscript can — and should — go to the same reviewers, so consider having them pre-agree or skip the invitation and send the revision directly to them. It would be helpful to have the ability to customize your correspondence with them, so they know it is a revision that includes comments and responses. This way they have everything on hand and can respond quickly. Also, consider how best to delegate editorial responsibility. In many cases, revision decisions may not need the editor-in-chief (EIC) approval, and can be delegated to associate editors — leaving the EIC to make the final “accept” or “reject” decisions.

Second, use a flexible online system that allows you to customize requirements at the journal level, including submissions questions, key words, files types, and field size limits. It should also feature customizable email templates for personal and automatically generated reminders, notifications, and reports.

Ideally, your online system should integrate all aspects of the submission, review, and publishing process — manuscript invitation, submission, real-time fee collection, file conversion, correspondence, tracking, reviewer management, decision making, reporting, issue planning, user data management, broadcast e-mail, XML metadata transformation, and integration with print and online production — in one easy-to-use package.

More than ever, identifying a web-based publishing production system that is cost-effective and fast can make the difference between thriving in the highly competitive publisher marketplace or not.

## 3 • Don’t waste time and money by simply replicating your old procedures

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**“Some journals are simply using their online systems much as they were when using a ‘paper-based’ system — trying to make the old way fit into new programs. This doesn’t work.”**

– Jason Roberts, Managing Editor, Headache

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Once you select an online peer review management tool and identify your unique workflow needs, how can you make sure your using your new system to its fullest potential? The first step is to resist the urge to force your new online system into your old, paper-based process.

You'll find that you can gain even more from your online management system if you invest in one that incorporates those useful functions that augment your publishing process. The more of these related tasks — collecting fees, processing forms, protecting against plagiarism, and streamlining Letters-to-the-Editor — that can be incorporated into a single online workflow, the better the use you are making of that system.

If you collect fees or require copyright, disclosures, or custom forms from your authors as part of your workflow, choose an online system that helps streamline that process. Look for systems that integrate and automate secure payment options — in multiple currencies if you work internationally — into your production workflow. A good system will also automatically request and collect electronic forms, track their progress, and generate reminders for key stakeholders. This is a huge time-saver for your authors as well as your administrative staff.

Another feature to look for in your online management system is plagiarism detection. Publishing a plagiarized or duplicated piece of work can have serious repercussions, so it's imperative to use every resource available to prevent an injustice to the original researchers, damage to the reputation of your publication, or any potential legal ramifications. You should be able to easily compare to content from thousands of other publications and the wider Internet at the click of a button. This will help ensure articles you publish are original work.

Finally, look for a peer review system that offers an easy-to-use online workflow for correspondence about important and thought-provoking articles — one that follows letters to the editors from review, to acceptance, to the efficient collation of author responses with that original article. A system that allows you to process the article and responses as a group and make decisions on what to publish — so all related submissions travel through the workflow together — will increase productivity and usability for everyone involved.

#### 4 • Focus on improving your publications and editorial strategy, instead of managing a process

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**“Time you may have spent searching for manuscripts that may be running late can now be used to identify reprint sale potential.”**

– Jason Roberts, *Managing Editor, Headache*

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Once you have an online system in place and you are taking advantage of its capabilities, you'll notice that your staff has more free time to focus on forward-thinking tasks like editorial development. Encourage and motivate them to identify trends in research such as which topics are becoming more prevalent and the countries that are focusing on a particular subject. This can increase submissions, raise the profile of your publications, or identify areas for growth, and opportunities for entirely new titles.

A peer review management system with robust reporting capabilities enables easy generation of strategic reports to get that big-picture view of your journal's performance. You should be able to pull business and performance metrics from scholarly publishing systems to help understand trends and best practices as well as track changes over time in publication topics or submission locations. Beyond analyzing your own journal's performance, you can use the time you save by optimizing your online system to look at the evolution of the subject area in general and answer questions such as:

- Do we need to cover a new topic?
- Do we need to spend less time on other topics?
- Are there new journals emerging that we should keep an eye on?
- Who are we competing with in our field and how are they doing?
- Does our publication meet the needs of our readers, libraries, educational institutes, and what could we be doing better?

Then, you can delve deeper into those trends to prepare future editions of your journal, look at the opportunity for new 'spin off' titles, or plan special editions highlighting “hot topics”. The data you need should be at your fingertips.

Acting strategically on this information can improve the performance of your journal through efficiency and cost-savings, as well as ensure stronger, more timely, more focused development of your content.

## 5 • Select a trusted partner, not just a vendor

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**“ScholarOne Manuscripts’ deep understanding of the demands of academic journal publishing has enabled Emerald to develop and implement a consistent end-to-end system for author submission, peer review and approval to publication. It provides an efficient workflow solution, without, above all, comprising the quality of contributors’ research.”**

*– Sarah Kennedy, Head of Publishing Logistics, Emerald Group Publishing Limited*

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As you search for a company to provide your online peer review management system, look for a company that is more than just a software supplier. Technical expertise is very different from industry expertise. No matter how well a vendor understands software code, if they can’t put it into real-world context and understand what your day-to-day publishing life is like, they won’t be in a strong position to advise or collaborate with you. Find a company that really understands the publishing industry — one who has experience supporting multiple societies and publishers from large to small, with a variety of publications such as books and journals, with an extensive range of different workflows. After all, you want a partnership with a company that you can trust to work with you to present the best possible options, make recommendations and help you spot best practices and new developments so that you’re not reacting to changes that have already happened.

And obviously the security and stability of a company is critical. Look for a provider who has the resources to offer state-of-the-art technology and data security. Make sure the technology standards and systems used will keep your information safe, secure, and functioning properly. Well-supported and managed systems ensure your system will be available when both you and your authors need it. Your online peer-review management system will be the key element in your day-to-day work so everyday stability and that long-term commitment on your vendor’s part are essential.

Lastly, be sure to select a company that values its ongoing investment in its product and is focused on customer-driven development. Once you select and implement a system you need to make sure it can grow with you, react to the ideas of yourself and your publishing peers, and not leave you looking for change elsewhere.

## Taking your journal into the 21st century

Implementing an online peer review management system, using it effectively, and using it to grow your business is a process in and of itself. Work to utilize your system in accordance with these best practices:

1. Be a champion for your authors and reviewers
2. Tailor your system to suit your unique needs
3. Don’t waste time and money by simply replicating your old procedures
4. Focus on improving your publication and your editorial strategy, instead of managing a process
5. Select a trusted partner, not just a vendor

Doing so will advance your current editorial office, help to grow your business, and take your journal’s manuscript process well into the 21st century.

For more information about online management systems and how they can help you streamline your editorial office, visit [scholarone.com/products/manuscript/](https://scholarone.com/products/manuscript/)

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