

The editorial board

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The term ‘editorial board’ is used by most journals to describe their academic editorial team. The make-up and responsibilities of the board vary enormously from journal to journal and often change with time, but a strong, proactive editorial team is essential to support a healthy, vibrant journal and ensure it meets both author and reader expectations. This chapter gives examples of the various structures and names given to editorial boards, and describes some of the wide variety of roles that editorial boards can and should play. These include peer review, acting as journal ambassadors, and contributing to editorial strategy and journal development. It is important to note that few, if any, journals will use their editorial boards in all of the ways described, each one deciding what is right for their needs.

Introduction

What constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘successful’ journal will vary, depending on the field, and whether authors, readers or owners are asked to judge. Some factors will include attracting the ‘best’ papers from the ‘best’ institutes, wide readership, providing a valuable membership benefit, being highly practical, having a high impact factor, the fastest peer review and publication times, or being highly profitable. Many of these issues are of course linked, but the balance that each journal aspires to differs.

Whichever measure of success is important to a journal, however, the editorial team is critical. They determine or contribute to the quality of papers accepted, the speed of review, the journal development, and the profile and positioning of the journal.

What is an editorial board?

For some the editorial board is a defined unit, listed as such on the journal masthead, whereas for others it is a generic term for everyone involved in the academic editorial team. Different sizes of journals warrant different sizes of editorial team, and with larger teams the structures and levels become more complex. In addition, some subject areas tend to use more consultative approaches and have structures to reflect this. A few examples are listed below (with the person or people having the most responsibility and involvement at the top):

Structure 1
 Editor(s)-in-chief
 Subject/associate editors
 Editorial board
 International advisory board

Structure 2
 Editor(s)
 Editorial board

Structure 3
 Editor(s)
 Editorial board
 International advisory board

Structure 4
 Editor(s)
 Advisory board
 Editorial panel

Names of the various members of the editorial team are often used interchangeably, so in this chapter 'editor' will be used to refer to the editor or editor-in-chief, and 'editorial board' will be taken to refer to the other members of the team.

Within any editorial structure some specific roles may be required. For example, a book reviews editor, supplement or special issue editor, reviews editor, etc. These are specific posts with specific responsibilities and will not be covered in this chapter.

Peer review

Peer review is a key part of the process by which journal editors select which articles to publish and use expert advice to improve, where appropriate, those that are to be accepted. It is also a feedback process that helps even the authors of those papers that are rejected to know what they should have done differently, either with their underlying research or in the writing of their article. The decision to accept or reject will largely be based on quality and content (whether it is within the journal's scope, whether it is interesting enough, whether it is original, etc.).

The rejection rate of journals varies widely, with some focusing on helping authors to improve their papers, but, increasingly, journals receive far more papers than can be published and so the rejection rates of many science journals published by Oxford University Press, for example, are over 70%.

There are many ways that editorial board members can be expected to participate in peer review and this does partly depend on the structure selected by a journal.

Accept/reject decisions

Some editorial boards hold regular meetings to decide which papers to accept or reject. This consultative approach has many advantages (for example, more feedback for authors and less chance of an appeal) and disadvantages (timeliness and impracticality for a large or international journal, or where editors are geographically dispersed).

Reviewer selection

For many journals the editor is not the only one to appoint reviewers (also known as referees and readers) for papers. Instead, the editor will assign a paper to a specific member of their editorial team (editorial board member, subject editor, associate editor, etc., depending on the journal's structure) who is an expert in that field, and that person will then assign reviewers and be responsible for assessing the reviewers' comments. Some journals expect the editorial board member to make a final decision on whether to accept or reject papers, while others will require the editorial board member to make a recommendation to the editor. The advantage of delegating this function is not only that it spreads the workload, but also that it ensures that the process is overseen by someone who is more familiar with the relevant subject area, leading – in theory – to better decision making and greater improvement of the final paper, which for journals covering a broad area can be very important. The potential downside is that it can lead to different standards (in acceptance criteria, speed and service) being applied and this is where the oversight of the main editor becomes crucial.

Immediate rejections

Reviewers are overloaded. Sending poor-quality papers out to a reviewer gives a poor impression of a journal. In addition, editors will only want to consider articles within the journal's scope. Therefore, for an increasing number of journals, papers may be rejected without being sent for full peer review. This decision will either be made by the editor (especially when it is a matter of scope or balance), perhaps after consultation with a specific editorial board member, or by the editorial board member responsible for arranging peer review for those papers. Some journals have immediate rejection rates of well over 50%. This is an advantage for authors because they get a quick decision, and good for the journal and the community at large because it reduces the burden on the whole system.

Appeals

If an author complains about a decision, the editor may want to consult with another member of the editorial team to get a second opinion. This may be a formal procedure or just an informal choice made by the editor.

Acting as reviewers

For journals that have multiple tiers within their overall editorial team there may be one tier of subject or associate editors who select reviewers and then another editorial board tier whose main task is reviewing. While the pool of reviewers is likely to be much larger than this editorial board, board members are often expected to do more reviews per year, be reliably fast, or act as a reviewer for a paper when it has been hard to assign it to someone else. Sometimes an invitation to join the board denotes an expectation of extra duties or responsibilities, and sometimes the editorial board listing merely serves as recognition for those that have served as reliable reviewers in the past.

Image and profile

The composition of a board can say a lot about a journal. People may pick up a sample copy of the journal, open the front cover and review the editorial board, and then put it straight back down if it does not resonate with them – the right names, the right subjects and regions represented, etc. For this reason a board needs to mirror what a journal is trying to achieve. These are some issues to be considered:

- *Active versus big names* This is often a difficult choice. Without the big names in a field, those people browsing the journal for the first time may not give it the credibility it deserves. However, the likelihood is that the biggest names in the field will also be extremely busy and be unable to commit much time to one journal as an editorial board member (they may well be editors for another journal, for example).
- *Subjects* The subject representation is important – mirroring not only what is needed to manage the submissions (i.e. if 70% of the journal is devoted to one topic, the majority of the editorial board should also be in this area), but also where a journal wants to be – having energetic editorial board members in an area can be a great way to attract submissions even from a field that is not a journal's traditional territory.
- *Geography* Does a journal require US editorial board members to attract US papers? In my opinion if an entire editorial team is, for example, European, this will be a barrier to attracting US submissions – partly because of profile and partly because there is no academic in the US proactively petitioning for submissions. However, the converse is not true – just adding US members to an editorial team does not guarantee a wealth of high-quality submissions – it is all about engagement. With the growing number of Asian submissions to many journals, especially in the sciences, is it wise to have these regions represented to ensure the best papers are attracted and also handled appropriately? In my opinion this can be useful, but it is all about getting balance and having realistic expectations.
- *Gender and race* As with all walks of life, as wide representation as possible is important to ensure a journal is not, and is seen not to be, biased or narrow-minded.

Journal ambassadors

Leading on from the image and profile that an editorial board automatically gives a journal is the topic of how this can best be exploited, by using the board members as ambassadors to help promote the journal.

With large editorial boards it is hard to communicate with everyone frequently and board members may be on so many boards that they do not feel specific loyalty to one journal. The challenge is to get that loyalty and provide the board members with the ammunition to be the journal's best advocates, by ensuring that the whole editorial team is engaged and aware of all of a journal's unique selling points.

There are various ways to engage with an editorial team, for example:

- *Editorial board meetings* These provide an excellent opportunity to say 'thank you', to report on the highs and lows for a journal and to get feedback on current content and strategy and input into future direction, competition and priorities.
- *Editorial board newsletters (printed or electronic)* Keeping an editorial board informed of a journal's unique selling points and goals is important if they are to encourage the right kind of submissions. A newsletter can be a great way to achieve this.
- *Letters from the editor* An alternative to the newsletter is a more personal letter from the editor.
- *E-mail discussion forum* This is used by some journals to discuss difficult papers or journal developments, and it helps to ensure that the group feels a part of the journal and not just a name on the journal cover.
- *Specific requests for help* Just asking for ideas is not usually going to provide useful input for journal development. However, if editors have specific queries, such as ideas for forthcoming special issues, these questions can be sent out directly to the board. Not only does this provide the required input but it also shows the dynamism and attitudes of the journal.

There are a number of different tasks that can be achieved by a proactive editorial board:

- *Active commissioning* Perhaps in key or hot new areas (or indeed weak areas in the journal), for example by targeting specific speakers at conferences. This might be facilitated by the provision of business cards or leaflets.
- *Increasing readership* Publishers can only ever attend a proportion of the conferences and events in any one field; editorial board members will attend a much wider range and so can be asked to distribute leaflets or even include a slide within a presentation to promote the journal where appropriate.
- *Increasing subscriptions* For growing journals, or where a journal is trying to break into a new region, editorial board members can be asked to encourage local libraries to subscribe. Alternatively, if a journal is suffering from unusually high attrition, they might be able to help explain this from an academic's perspective, providing complementary information to anything acquired through surveys of librarians.

Advisors

Editorial board members may be appointed for a variety of reasons, as described above, but they will usually include some of the great, creative minds of their field. Because of the number of people involved there should also be a good cross-section of a community. Therefore, editorial boards represent a huge pool of strategic advice.

Feedback

What is good about the journal and what isn't? How does it compare with the main competitors? Is it their first choice when submitting an article – if not, what needs to change? What papers do they enjoy reading or look for in the journal? What do they associate with the journal – is this the image planned or is work required to change market perception? Feedback can (and should) of course be obtained from a much wider group than just the editorial board, but this group should be relied upon for more in-depth discussions and debate.

Input into future strategy

The editorial board should be involved, to one degree or another, in setting the strategy and goals for a journal. The amount of involvement will depend on the size of the board, with some people and tiers naturally being more involved than others. Strategic decisions need to be set by a small, core group, but finding a way to engage the wider group helps to keep the journal fresh and thereby competitive. It is worth noting again that many board members belong to many journals' boards and so it is important to

know who is loyal to a journal and who is only providing 'broad-brush' information. Specific strategic contributions can be through:

- *Subject expertise* Board members are the journal's eyes and ears in their areas of expertise, and can alert the editor to changes or hot topics that should be incorporated into a journal's scope.
- *Competitor awareness* Board members will, between them, have a broad base of knowledge about competitors which can be used to define a journal's competitive niche.
- *Ideas and innovations* The range of people on a board can provide a pool of ideas and a wide base to help determine which ideas are right for a particular journal. This is becoming particularly important with so many online developments possible: open access, blogs, video clips, e-letters, and so on. Few journals will want all the functionality that is available, so the editorial board can provide useful feedback on these ideas.

Author pool

It is important to remember that an editorial board is also a prime author pool. A journal may want to encourage any type of submission from editorial board members, or may want to adopt a more proactive stance requiring editorial board members to make a specific number and type of submissions during their term (again this will vary with the structure of an editorial board). Senior editorial board members (e.g. associate or deputy editors) may be asked to contribute editorials, and editorial board members could be required to submit or commission a quota of review articles each year. If an editorial board is also involved in the peer review of articles, their submissions to the journal should be handled by someone else in the team. It is also essential that this process is transparent so that it is clear that papers by board members are not receiving preferential treatment. But with this caveat, it is important to encourage submissions from an editorial board – the best people in the field will be on a journal's board and it would put a journal at a competitive disadvantage to exclude them.

Editorial boards for young journals

Young journals need editorial teams who are willing and able to show a greater level of commitment, for example giving more time, being more proactive in commissioning and with much less recognition.

Rewarding editorial board members

Different journals have different funds available, so it is hard to generalize about appropriate rewards. Many editors will receive an honorarium, but frequently other members of the editorial team will not. But the part they play in making the journal a success is important and finding a way to recognize this is important for all journals and can be achieved in a number of ways, such as:

- a gratis subscription (print and/or online) to the journal, perhaps including free access to the journal's archive online if this is available, even if it is not part of a normal subscription;
- a letter from the editor – it sounds simple, but a direct 'thank you' can go a long way;
- a list of the most active reviewers (which will often include key members of the editorial board) published annually (although it is worth noting that if you are only publishing two issues a year then listing the reviewers can give away the anonymity);
- editorial board reception or dinner – this does depend on funds, but if done for those already attending a particular conference the costs can be moderated;
- awards – some journals recognize the most active editorial board members with an annual award;
- a discount on the publisher's books;
- gifts – some journals provide a small token gift (e.g. a branded diary, CD vouchers, book tokens, etc.).

Terms of office

Historically, many people were invited on to editorial boards and remained there for many years, with no thought of replacement even when they ceased to be active on the journal's behalf. With the increased workloads for academics generally and the growing requirements for active editorial board membership, it is increasingly advised that editorial board members are invited for a specific term of office, e.g. three years. This may of course be renewed at the editor's discretion, again for a specific term, but this allows both parties an easy exit point. This is sometimes harder to implement in practice than it sounds, for example because of the relationships involved, but it is important and is helped if the formal process is established and adhered to. Having a rolling editorial board also means that fresh ideas and new energy are always coming into the journal, which helps journal development and vitality.

As discussed throughout this article, editorial board members can be expected to play numerous roles, and it is therefore essential that, when inviting someone on to a board, it is clearly specified what is expected of them to ensure that they really buy in to your expectations.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a list of various roles that editorial board members, however they are defined on a specific journal, can be given. There is no 'right' combination that will ensure the success of a journal, and each journal must decide on the best structure for its current needs, whilst keeping in mind that this may change over time as the market and competition change.

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Biographical note

Mandy Hill is Editorial Director for Science and Medicine within the Academic and Journals Divisions at Oxford University Press. Mandy has worked at OUP for ten years. Prior to becoming an Editorial Director in 2006, she was responsible for the clinical journals portfolio. Mandy has also worked at Elsevier and a medical communications agency. She is on the ALPSP Professional Development Committee and is an ALPSP course tutor.

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