



A Hot Mess: Adventures in Transitioning an Editor-in-Chief

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“It’s sensitive,” the Publishing Managers told me. “The outgoing editors....” And then no one ever finished the sentence. The journal was getting a new EIC, and the society wanted us to take on peer-review management at the same time. (The current journal administrators were the outgoing editors’ assistants at the hospitals where they worked, and they were not staying on.) There were hints the co-EICs had been asked to retire. They had been in their positions for over 15 years.

So, I asked, when I should get this transition underway? Who should I reach out to?

Well, they said, it’s sensitive. And then no one answered my questions, because no one knew.

Transitioning editors is hard.

As a Managing Editor working for a large publisher, I manage a portfolio of titles, and expect that my list can change at any time. In practice, however, I had a stable list of five small proprietary journals, and for three years there had been no EIC changes. Then, in April, I was informed a medium-sized society journal was going into my portfolio. The incoming EIC was eager and full of ideas; the outgoing EICs were a mystery. It was *sensitive*.

Yes, I nodded, I get it. Use all my people skills. But, this transition is happening, and I have no idea how. There are nuts and bolts that need attention, and they do not care if anyone involved is sensitive. What are the outgoing EICs planning? What are the transition dates? Is there any existing workflow documentation? Should I contact the outgoing EICs directly, or wait to be introduced? Who will introduce me?

Nothing. The nuts and bolts are not the Publishing Manager’s concern. Relationship management is their focus. No one wanted to put a foot wrong and risk disrupting the society relationship. There was no best practice model for a concurrent

EIC and Managing Editor transition, no one to tell me “this is how you do it.”

My other titles transitioned to a team of Editorial Assistants. I would now manage them while they managed the journals. My whole job was changing. My head was spinning. I created packet after packet of workflow documents, trained the Editorial Assistants, soothed my Editors that I was still around, and fretted about the new journal. I stared at blank workflow documents, and waited. I finally met with the new EIC to get acquainted and lay out her agenda. I quickly realized she was in frequent contact with the outgoing co-EICs, and no one seemed overcome with drama. By the end of that meeting, I had transition dates and contact information for the current administrative assistants. I took the bull by the horns and wrote to them, and it turned out I was actually holding a sleepy steer by the ears. One of the co-EIC was having heart bypass surgery and wanted to be done even earlier than planned. The other’s assistant was very candid about her eagerness to be done with the journal so she could focus on her full-time job at the hospital. They had all, they said, been waiting for us to tell them what to do.

This is when I remembered that my job title included the word “managing,” and that stepping forward to take charge of a transition was not an insensitive thing to do. It was expected; transitions need a point person. Journals are the arena of transition. Papers are constantly shifting from person to person; authors and reviewers and editors come and go. An effective journal has a Managing Editor to coordinate the constant state of movement and change.

Was the transition easier after this stunning epiphany? Not really. I still made mistakes, hesitated too much, forgot to include this person or that or an email, had to mitigate unrealistic

expectations from the incoming EIC, and was generally plagued with the daily feeling that I was missing something for the first month or so. We ran over our target dates for the outgoing co-EICs to wrap up their papers, but by that point, we had our workflow in place, so no one was confused and the world didn't end. A smooth transition doesn't mean there are no problems; it means the problems are well handled.

I found out this week that two of my other titles are getting new EICs next summer. Yikes! Here's what I'll be keeping in mind:

- Step up and manage. If no one coordinates the transition, or even gets the ball rolling, I should do it myself. Most, if not all, parties will be thankful someone took charge.
- Simple and direct communication is best. If I act like everything is business-as-usual, others will be put at ease and follow my lead.
- Organized documentation is my best friend. Don't be afraid to ask the outgoing personnel if they have anything written down, or wouldn't mind filling out a brief questionnaire. (I speak from hindsight on this—I did not ask the outgoing administrative assistants to fill out any workflow documents, and I wish I had.)
- Be prepared to offer training materials to new people. New EICs like to bring on new Associate Editors and reviewers, and there's no guarantee any of them have used the systems before.
- Reach out to others. Ask what they did, if they have any templates for workflow documents or training packets, any best practices, any advice. Sometimes all you need is a sympathetic ear for a few minutes before you go back to your desk and answer that pile of questions from your new Editor.

ISMTE Member Corner
Welcome to our newest members!

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Ellie Needs
World Obesity Federation

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