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Developing Communications: Customising and Automating Submission System Templates

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One of the most frequently raised issues with peer review is the long delay many authors experience with the process. The four main roles contributing to the reviewing process are the administrator, the editor handling the manuscript, the referees, and of course, the authors. Fast turnaround times, from submission to decision to resubmission to acceptance, depend on effective communication between these roles. In the event that a speedy response is not possible, a way to alleviate the frustration of authors waiting for a decision is to update them on the status of their manuscript.

From 2004 to 2012 I was employed by Taylor & Francis as a peer-review administrator, responsible for the day-to-day of almost 30 psychology journals, dealing with hundreds of submissions a month. It was a big task to keep up with the basic housekeeping required on all these titles, but the challenge was to be able to provide a greater level of personable service on this scale.

Now, in the days before online reviewing platforms, I managed all my titles with an Access database, and therefore had complete control of everything. When the time came to move all my journals over to online systems, I did so with a sense of trepidation, concerned that I was going to lose the homespun elements that my journal communities found so appealing about the services I provided. Indeed, I received many emails from editors with the same fears, based on their experiences of online systems, and the stories they had been told about the "cold, impersonal, template" correspondence.

Well, of course, I would never have been able to manage 30 journals if I had written every email by hand. In fact, almost all of my correspondence was sent either through automated mail-merges, or email signatures. If I didn't give myself a victory spin in my chair, I am sure I threw a little mental celebration the first time I sent 1,000 emails in one day. But never once did I receive a message from anyone suggesting messages from my Access database were "cold, impersonal templates."

Something I am particularly passionate about is providing very considerate customer services, and being forthcoming with information. My logic behind this is that the peer-review administrator knows the status of the manuscripts, so there is no reason the authors and editors should not know. My trusted Access database had a seemingly endless series of buttons with layers of reports in them, triggering pop-ups and filling reports to be mail-merged, covering all sorts of scenarios to leave no stone unturned. I had weekly reports for decision-making editors, with all the manuscripts they were handling accompanied by a multitude of comments instructing them on what needed doing, letters to chase reviewers for their comments should they be late, and off the back of those, letters to editors to inform them of late reviewers, the number of reminders sent, on which dates, and whether any other reviews had been submitted for that manuscript. I also sent updates to authors every time the status of their manuscripts changed, giving them every piece of information I could. In response to all these automatically sent template letters, I received many responses from people, especially authors, thanking me for my consideration and the personal notes updating them, which they had never received before from other journals.

Automation is perhaps the most double-edged instrument in the peer-review toolkit. It serves efficiency, but fuels some of the bad reputation the process comes in for. Automating updates reduces the amount of time spent manually checking the

status of manuscripts, and templating reduces the need to write brand new letters each time. Sending updates to authors can also reduce the number of initial queries themselves, and most importantly, proactively informs authors about the reviewing process. For me, this was one of the more motivating factors in setting up notifications: to provide that proactive service.

Just because these emails were triggered automatically doesn't mean they were not written in a personable manner, and I believe that was the key. These letters were, essentially, personally written notes, because I had written them. Just because they were being triggered by a machine did not mean they had to sound mechanical or impersonal.

I was somewhat sceptical that I could recreate everything from my Access database through an online system, but I took a tour, set up some demo sites, and was convinced by the convenience, and more importantly, the access to information and direct abilities the editors would be granted. I could sense potential in the full automation of ScholarOne—no more button presses to launch emails would be a great time saver. It didn't take long for me to discover that the ScholarOne (and later, Editorial Manager) sites contain enough customisable features to allow for suitably detailed updates to be triggered by granular events.

Some of the notifications I set up were very simple, relying on the completion of a task to trigger the email. Some were slightly more complex, and required adjustment of various configurations in the system to make them work effectively. For example, many ScholarOne site administrators are familiar with double-blind review workarounds for sending copies of decision letters to authors and reviewers.

Before setting up any notifications in the sites I worked on, I always asked the permission of the editors of the journals to ensure they were happy with everything, or to veto any letters they didn't want. I feel this is good practice because it is appropriate to get sign-off on letters which essentially detail an editor's work performance, include editors in the editorial decision-making of the journal, and inform them of developments they may be unaware of otherwise.

Below I describe some examples of popular automations I routinely set up in ScholarOne Manuscripts websites, and the ways in which they are triggered:

- I set a notification to authors when sufficient referees have agreed to review a manuscript, based on the Assign Reviewers task being completed. This letter informs authors that the editor has managed to secure the required number of referees. This letter does not include the names of the reviewers, of course.
- A notification to authors when all reviews are received, based on the Decision task becoming pending. This letter informs authors that all the reviews are in and their manuscript is with the editor awaiting their decision.
- Some of the notification triggers are caused by the lengths of time a manuscript has spent in certain tasks. These are the more important letters, in my opinion, as they can alleviate the silent void of the infamous "black hole" of the review process.

The greatest causes of delays in peer review are at the reviewer assignment stage, and waiting for reviews to be submitted. Just because the word "reviewer" appears twice in describing the longest periods of waiting does not necessarily mean it is the "fault" of the referees that such delays occur. Assigning reviewers can be a protracted process, with many requests being legitimately declined due to time constraints and subject area mismatches. When I was an administrative assistant, an Editor and I once invited 18 individuals in order to secure two reviewers. The correspondence involved in all those review requests naturally delayed the manuscript, and neither of us could have anticipated so many declines. But in order to achieve the basic standard of review we required, we persisted. From my experience, such delays can always be mitigated by communication. It is the silence during reviewing that authors find the most frustrating.

Using the length of a time a reviewer takes to submit can also be used to trigger an email to the action editor to advise them of the late reviewer, as well as a reminder to that referee and a notification

to the author. I tended to send the notification to the action editor first, to give them a chance to decide what course of action to take. After several days I would send the reminder to the referee to see whether they would submit their review, then several days after that, the update to the authors. This gives each person enough time to respond with an update in case they will take any actions on it, such as an immediate decision, or submitting the review.

Sometimes it can be a little tricky to set the automations because of the mechanisms by which the websites work. My notification to authors of the assignment of an action editor to their manuscript had to be triggered by the Select Reviewers task becoming "overdue." This was because manuscripts that received an immediate reject decision move through the pending and completed Select Reviewers tasks. Using either of those as the trigger, as I had done for other notifications, would result in the author being advised of a "blank" action editor at the same time as receiving a rejection. Confusing and unprofessional. Using the overdue trigger ensured that only manuscripts remaining in that queue for more than 24 hours would receive this

particular notification. This meant that some authors did not receive this particular notification, because their manuscripts were assigned to action editors before they became overdue, but that was not a problem because the information was also included in subsequent messages about the reviewing status.

As well as setting automatically triggered updates, you can equip peer-review sites with many template emails to manually select in a variety of situations when manual intervention is required. For example, the Hyperlink emails section of ScholarOne can be used for submission checking. Some examples of such templates include admin checks, such as double blinding, exceeding word length, wrong format, missing information, or standard of writing; Special Issue templates for sending to editors, assigning guest editors, inviting reviewers, and making decisions; and Pre-Production emails for requesting copies of final files, un-blinded manuscripts, high-resolution figures, or permission checks on reproduced images.

These are just some examples of many different automations I have added to sites over the years to respond to author and editor requirements, and to manage the demands on my time. In Table 1,

Table 1. Frequently used custom notifications in ScholarOne Manuscripts.

Recipient	Notification	Trigger
Author	Action editor assignment	Select Reviewers task becomes overdue
Author	Referees secured	Assign Reviewers task is completed
Author	Reviewing update (delayed reviewer assignment)	50 days (*e.g.*) after Assign Reviewers task becomes pending
Author	Reviewing update (delayed review submission)	50 days (*e.g.*) after review agreed
Author	Final review received	Decision becomes pending
Author	Decision update	30 days (*e.g.*) after Decision becomes pending
Author	Revision enquiry	30 days (*e.g.*) before revision due date
Author	Revision overdue enquiry	30 days (*e.g.*) after revision due date
Author	Paper sent to production	Manuscript files export is successful
Action editor	Late reviewer	30 days (*e.g.*) after review agreed
Action editor	Very late reviewer—decision or new reviewer request	50 days (*e.g.*) after review agreed
Action editor	Decision overdue	14 days (*e.g.*) after Decision becomes pending
Reviewer	Late review	28 days (*e.g.*) after review agreed

I have provided a summary of these and a few more, for easy reference of the recipient, type of notification, and how it is triggered. Every site is different, and every journal has different workflows and its own unique requirements. Even if these examples would not suit all sites, I hope they will give an idea of the things that are possible and inspire some new approaches to managing communications with journal communities. The ScholarOne Ideas forum is another great place to draw inspiration from, swap ideas, and ask for answers to problems you may be experiencing with the sites. I can be found there offering my opinions, or you can reach me by email if you would like to know more about anything in this article.

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