I am happy to contribute Part Two of the ISMTE North America Virtual Event conversation with Past Presidents: Elizabeth Blalock, Julie Nash, Kristen Overstreet, Jason Roberts, and Michael Willis. Please enjoy this glimpse into the virtual event, as each speaker looks back on the early days of their careers, shares hindsight from past challenges, and reflects on the best career advice they have ever received.

(Please note that the question answers and some phrasing have been edited for length and clarity; the question order has been modified based on theme. All opinions expressed are those of the speakers. The first moderator, M1, is Meghan McDevitt; the second, M2, is Kristen Anderson.)

M1: What is the best career advice you’ve ever received?

JASON: I would say the best advice I’ve ever received was about two things: relationships and communication. It doesn’t matter how good you are at your job, how fast you are, whatever... If you're not any good at those two things, then you're going to fail. However much this is a numbers game, it’s still very much about the relationships that you foster. I think that’s helped me tremendously. First, I was a publisher; I trained at what was Blackwell Publishing, or Blackwell Science, now Wiley. Back then, it was a society publisher, so you had to work hard. You didn’t own journals, so you had to work to keep your clients happy. It doesn’t matter if it's an author, a reviewer, an editor, reader; you treat everyone the same, and you treat them with respect. You know, I never miss an opportunity with a reviewer, if they’re asking me for an extension, to just say, “Thank you for volunteering your time to provide peer review.” Every opportunity to communicate with someone is an opportunity to foster a relationship and build the relationship they have with your journal. That advice was given to me from a publisher in the late 1990s, and it’s still true today. Nothing has changed. Maybe the ways that we communicate have changed; we’re not still writing handwritten letters. It doesn’t matter if it’s a tweet now, it’s still really important. I think to anyone that’s early in their career, remember that now, because I couldn’t give you any better advice than that.

ELIZABETH: One piece of advice I got was from the big boss that I worked for before I started being a Managing Editor. I asked him what advice he would give me to be successful, and he said, “Deflect praise onto the people that work with you, and accept blame.” I have tried to always do that, and I think that it was really good advice. The other piece of advice comes from my father, who always says, “If it’s not worth doing, it’s not worth doing right.” To me, that means figure out what your priorities are, what is important, what is worth doing, and then you can really concentrate your efforts on those things.

M2: What is your favorite thing about being involved with ISMTE?

ELIZABETH: Being involved with ISMTE has really been one of the best things about being in publishing. As others have said, being associated with the folks that we’ve been associated with, especially in the founding of the organization, but also in keeping its continuity and starting something from scratch, was really very exciting. It’s actually one of the things I’m most proud of in my career. Jason had an idea and he came to some of us and said, “Hey, what do you think?” and we kind of all ran with it, made this thing happen, and here we are years and years later. I think I want to say, too, to people who are either new to the organization or becoming involved, that you too can start something from scratch here. There are opportunities, and if you see a need or if you want to do something, I think this is the kind of place where the leadership is open to hearing new ideas about how to serve this group of people who are all here to help each other. It’s really been a wonderful thing to develop colleagues, and
then friends, who you know you can call when you have a situation where you need advice. I would really just encourage people to not think as ISMTE as a thing that’s already established and firm, but as a thing that’s malleable, where people can still have influence and where all of that energy and excitement is welcome and needed.

**M1: If you could go back to the beginning of your professional career, is there anything you would do differently or change?**

**JULIE:** It’s interesting that I got this question, because I’ve had similar conversations recently with my 17-year-old son who is just getting ready to apply to colleges, has no idea what he wants to do, and wants to know, in a glimmer of a moment that he cares what his mother does or thinks, how I got to where I am. It’s been interesting to go back and think about the path that I did take. Like a lot of us, I sort of “fell into” it, but if I could go back and [redo] it, I don’t know that I would change where I got. I would change my approach when I went into college and when I joined the workforce. I very much had a tunnel vision of what I wanted to be and where I wanted to go. I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to work in DC, and that was that. That was where I wanted to end up, and I put blinders on that. I was very rigid about that path. So when I started down that path, and I realized that maybe I did want to pivot, it was really a hard emotional choice for me to make. I had put myself in this path, and I wasn’t flexible. So my piece of advice to you all, and to my 17-year-old-son, is to keep an open mind. Think about things that interest you and challenge you at different moments. Then look at where that path might take you, whether that’s in a particular area within publishing, or outside of publishing, actually. I think that, to me, would have been something that I would have changed about how I approached my career.

**JASON:** Before I answer, I’ll just tell you how I fell into publishing and peer review: I finished my PhD and was looking for some money, and the temping agency in Oxford, England, said, “Well you can go work in the admin department at the local mental health hospital, or you can go open the mail at Blackwell Publishing.” So I thought, well, I’m not really sure mental health is where I want to go, so I went to publishing. That’s literally how I fell into it, and honestly, I couldn’t have picked a better career. I went from opening the mail at Blackwell to doing what I do now, and I’m very thankful for those opportunities. So my advice would be: If you see something and no one else seems to be seeing it, don’t think that you’re wrong. The amount of times I’d sit there looking at numbers, going, “Why are all of these people that are 20 or 30 years experienced, or so-called experts, saying this? The numbers don’t seem to be saying it to me.” I’m not saying that I’m good at math or anything like that; I’m just saying that sometimes you are right, and a lot of people are just winging it. I only know that because I’ve winged it myself many a time. Other people, just because they have a fancy title, don’t necessarily know the details like you do. So be assertive; don’t be aggressive, but be assertive if you can see something’s wrong and they’re going to make fools of themselves. Tell them, and if they’re big enough they’ll appreciate it. Just because you’ve got two or three years under your belt and someone else has got 30, don’t defer to them all the time. That would be my advice. Maybe that just comes with age, I don’t know, but that would be my advice.

**M1: Describe a time where you made a mistake. What did you learn, and what would be your advice for others?**

**KRISTEN:** I think we all get awfully nervous about making mistakes, but they’re part of life and you actually learn a lot from them. I think it’s important to be honest. Accept the blame. Find out what you can do to correct the problem, and then move on from it and hopefully you’ve learned something. To continue to beat yourself up over something is typically not useful; learn what you can from it. Move forward, and don’t make that mistake again if you can help it.

**M1: What is the most rewarding thing you’ve experienced during your career so far?**

**MICHAEL:** Well my most embarrassing mistake at Wiley was filling a hire car with petrol instead of diesel, which cost the company a bit of money to tow back to the office. More haste, less speed is a good motto, really. I can be guilty of being impetuous, of rushing into things, but actually, quality is compromised by doing that. There’s no point in rushing things for the sake of it. I completely echo what Kristie said: People make mistakes, that’s part of life. Being honest, coming clean, is by far the best response. No skirting around it; no mitigation; no excuses. Acknowledge the mistake, plan how you will remedy it, and take firm steps to try and prevent it from recurring.

**MICHAEL:** I guess being President of ISMTE. Do I get points for saying that? Seriously though, I think being on the Board with some exceptional talent and being involved in committees at the Society; all of that engagement with networking and meeting people with so much talent and experience has really been thoroughly rewarding. I think it’s stood me in great stead in my career development at Blackwell and then Wiley. My role now is Researcher Advocate.
It’s a role where I’m capitalizing on the experience and expertise I’ve been able to garner through being involved in ISMTE and other bodies, to help me foster things that are actually my personal and professional interests. I remember one previous Board member described himself as a self-confessed peer-review nerd, and I know where he’s coming from. I share the same sort of instincts in a way, but, really, I couldn’t think of myself being in a happier role than I am at the moment. I think when your personal interests merge with your professional ones, that’s a really good place to be.

JULIE: Since Michael already took the ISMTE angle, I’ll take my other “hat.” I would say that the most rewarding thing that I have gotten to do, and get to do, is to work with folks who are entering the publishing career, have sort of fallen into it, or come out of college and come into this job. Being able to watch, help train, develop, mentor, and collaborate with people as they move up through being an editorial assistant, a managing editor, and then become experts in the field, and people who are speaking at different sessions at ISMTE, is the most rewarding thing. It’s not just the ability for them to grow, but how we’re growing the profession. I see that as very rewarding, and I’m certainly very proud of those people that I’ve gotten to work with. I’m excited to see their careers grow and change and see them go off to do amazing things.

M2: What unique skills have you gained from working in this industry that you might not have learned elsewhere? Did you have an unrelated skill, before you started in this industry, that you feel has set you apart?

JULIE: I think a skill that I would say is kind of unrelated, that people don’t realize how much really ties into what we do now, especially with everything going online, is customer service. I feel like a lot of people don’t necessarily come into publishing, and what we do in managing journals, thinking of it as a customer service job. They see it more as working with words, or processing papers, and that kind of thing. I think it was touched on earlier that those relationships are so key; so I do think a real eye for customer service with authors, reviewers, and editors, is definitely key and an applicable skill to what it is we do that might not have struck people that way.

MICHAEL: I have a colleague who, in one of her more cynical moments, said that publishing was full of failed academics. It’s a cynical thing to say, but I think in a better moment, what she might have said was something along the lines of: Publishing is a great way to use your skills if you’ve been in academia. You can put them to a different sort of use. I couldn’t hack doing a PhD, or DPhil, as they call them in Oxford, so I stopped after my MPhil, but what I really appreciate about publishing is the ability to get alongside academics and researchers at the coalface (i.e., in the trenches), and really engage with them in a way that means I can enjoy that side of academia, but without the effort.

JASON: I tend to agree with that. You know, some of the people I did my PhD with are full professors up at British universities, or across the world, and I don’t envy them. I much prefer my life where I can talk to these folks, but I can also do the other stuff, the fun stuff that we do. I still indulge my research interests. I love poking around and playing with peer-review data. I think one skill that I brought over from academia is being able to ask research questions and try and answer them.

KRISTEN: A random skill that I have thought of multiple times is five semesters of typing I took in high school. I would say that has been extremely helpful for the amount of typing that we all do and communicating. I can type fast, so I can move on and type that next letter pretty quick. The other one is attention to detail. I think probably all of us have that skill; I think you have to have it in this industry and the work that we do.