

The Next Generation of Peer Reviewers: Survey of Journals (Pilot Study)

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Background

Performing quality peer reviews can be a challenging task for young reviewers, as there is often little to no training during medical school, residency, or graduate school. Journals should be concerned with reviewer training as this could affect review and, thus, article quality. We wanted to determine if reviewer training is something journals are attentive to and, if so, how is training approached? We designed a pilot study in which a sample of medical journals were surveyed about peer reviewer training. The survey gathered journal data (staffing structure, editorial policies, reviewer demographics) and questioned journal staff about peer reviewer training, both specific to the journal and broadly for journals in general.

Purpose

- Identify whether reviewer training deserves the attention of editorial office staff,
- Obtain a baseline of current training practices,
- Identify any gaps in training and suggest solutions for future training initiatives,
- Determine whether a full-scale study about reviewer training across multiple journals, editors, and publishers would be feasible.

Methods

- 7 medical journals, representing various specialties and managed by Origin Editorial, were selected to participate in the survey.
- A survey was prepared and sent to the editorial office (EO) of each journal.

Results

- Of the 7 journal offices invited to participate in the survey, 6 completed the survey. All who completed the survey identified themselves as the managing editor/peer review manager of the journal.
- We found that few journals currently offer training (n=2), but most perceive a need for training (n=5).
- 5 responded that the journal's editor-in-chief (EIC) perceived a need for training; however, only 2 responded that the journal's EIC believed it was the journal's job to train reviewers (EIC believed it was not the journal's job to train reviewers [n=3]; unsure [n=1]).

Figure 1. How Do You Think People Learn How to Peer Review?

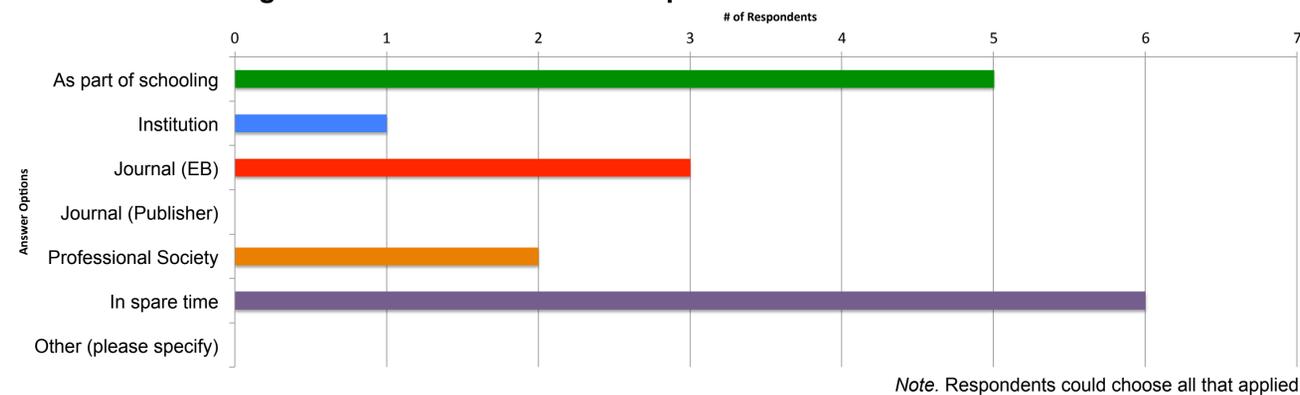


Figure 2. Why Does Your Journal Not Offer Peer Review Training?

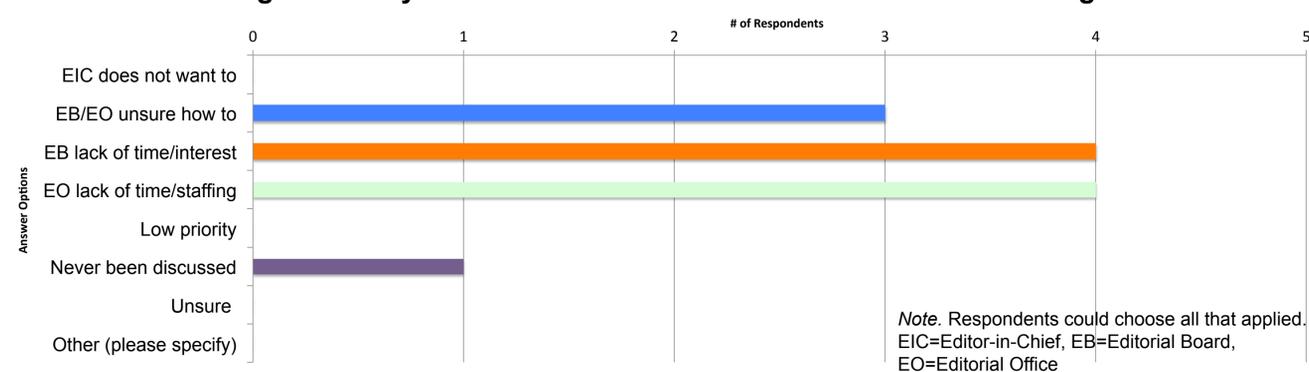
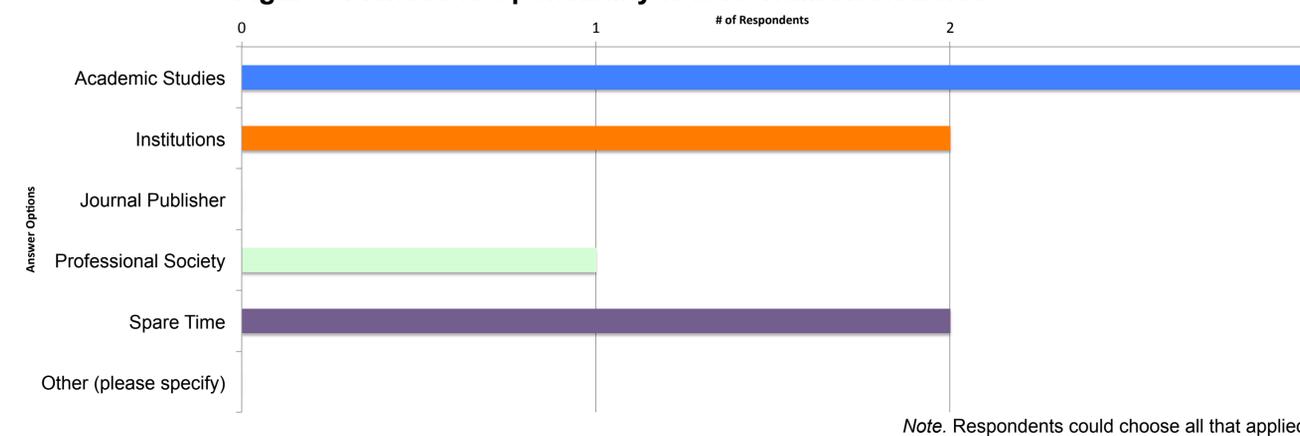


Figure 3. Whose Responsibility Is It To Train Reviewers?



- 2 journals currently train reviewers; 4 do not. Of the 4 who do not train reviewers:
 - The reasons given were: editorial board (EB)/EO lack time (n=4); EB/EO unsure how to offer it (n=3); and never been discussed (n=1). (See Figure 2.)
 - 1 journal would like to offer reviewer training; 3 would not.
 - All 3 respondents who did not want to offer training believe it is not the journal's job to train reviewers. (See Figure 3 for how these respondents think reviewers should receive training.)
 - 2 confirmed a new peer reviewer's previous experience before inviting him/her to review; 2 did not.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Questions	Responses		
# of EO staff	1 person (n=3)	2-3 people (n=2)	4-5 people (n=1)
Submissions/year	100-500 (n=3)	500-1000 (n=2)	>1000 (n=1)
Reviewers want training	Yes (n=2)	No (n=0)	Unsure (n=4)
Review Process	Single blind (n=3)	Double blind (n=3)	Open (n=0)
Students allowed to perform review under the name of a mentor.	Yes (n=6)		
Offer reviewer incentives	Yes (n=0)		
Impact Factor	Yes (n=5), range = 0.694-3.289		

Note. EO = Editorial Office

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the question of how peer review training is defined. "Reviewer training" can be broadly interpreted. It could be as simple as a general how-to (technical training on the editorial system; how to submit a review); to training on how to review the clinical and/or methodological sections of a paper; to general "how to peer review"—a complete overview of the peer review process.

The technical "how-to" is presumably part of EO services. The deeper level training on how to perform a comprehensive peer review may go beyond the scope of the EO's knowledge base. This training is harder to define and opinions differ on how people access this training (See Figure 1).

Conclusions

Of the journals surveyed, few offer training, yet most perceive a need for training. It is not clear where the responsibility for reviewer training should lie (see Figure 3) or what, in fact, constitutes reviewer training.

There are consequences for the quality of peer review if no one engages researchers on the methods for evaluating a paper. If no one wishes to claim responsibility for reviewer training, journals must take it into their own hands if they want to improve the quality of the peer review they deliver. A potential side effect of training reviewers is that in learning how to deconstruct a paper as a reviewer, they learn how to construct a paper as an author.

For a more thorough understanding of this complex topic, additional research is needed.

