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A Retrospective Examination of a Successful Developmental Reviewing Process

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A Retrospective Examination of a Successful Developmental Reviewing Process

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In this essay, we describe a retrospective examination of a review process for a manuscript that was published in the *Journal of Management Studies (JMS)* in 2015 (Hannah & Robertson, 2015). The two authors of the essay are (a) the first author of the *JMS* manuscript, David Hannah, and (2) the *JMS* editor of that manuscript, Dries Faems. We originally engaged in this examination to prepare for a presentation at the Strategy Process Interest Group workshop on “The Process of Publishing Process Research” during the 2015 Strategic Management Society meeting in Denver, Colorado. We have written this essay with a goal of sharing our observations about this review process. Although we share some of the content of the original manuscript herein, we focus most of our attention on describing each step in the review process from the perspective of the author as well as the editor. We conclude by offering what we hope are useful and generalizable lessons about the challenges that authors and editors face in the review process, how to navigate them, and how to systematically improve the overall review process.

We begin in July 2013, with *JMS* submission P0431, titled, “Why do Employees put Confidential Information at Risk? CI Protection and Confidentiality Tension in High-Tech Employees.” The paper reported the findings of a qualitative, theory-elaborating study involving 55 semistructured interviews with the employees of two high-tech companies.

Original Submission: July 2013

Author (David Hannah): In this research, we asked employees about confidential information in their companies, why they would and would not protect it, and how they felt about their company’s confidential information protection regimes. When I write up the results of qualitative studies such as this one, I am always prepared for my paper to change substantially in response to the feedback from editors and reviewers. So while we believed in our initial theoretical framing and had received positive feedback in friendly reviews from colleagues, we were open to change. We were hoping for an invitation to revise and resubmit along with clear direction about where the paper needed to go.

Editor (Dries Faems): As a general editor at the *JMS*, I gave the paper a first reading to decide whether this paper should be desk rejected or send out for reviewer comments. When screening the original manuscript, I thought this was an interesting topic, I did not see crucial problems with the methodology, and the model in the findings section seemed to make sense. So I decided to send it out to three reviewers who were specialists in the topic of confidentiality. In the end, I received a review report from all three specialists, providing quite diverging opinions on the quality and potential of the manuscript. One reviewer was very positive. The other two, however, identified several major issues. At the same time, these two reviewers also indicated to me that the topic of the paper did have potential. After reading the review reports, I agreed with the more pessimistic reviewers. My conclusion was that, to bring this paper to a *JMS* level, a lot of time and a lot of work would be necessary. First, the paper needed a broader framing to make it interesting and appealing for a broader audience. Although I could see how the paper could be interesting for the narrow community of scholars who are interested in the particular topic of confidentiality, it was difficult to see how this paper could be interesting for a broader community of management scholars. Second, the paper was lacking a clear process model. Although the authors had developed some concepts, I wanted to see explicit theorizing on the connections between them. In the end, taking into account that all three reviewers stressed the potential of the topic, I invited the authors to revise and resubmit the paper. In my decision letter, I explicitly indicated that it was a high-risk invitation.

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First Revise and Resubmit: November 2013

Author: We were delighted to receive the revise and resubmit (R&R) but were wary of the “high risk” designation. Given the feedback from the editor and reviewers, we worked toward a broader theoretical framing, focusing on the confidential information protection rules, and developed a clearer theoretical model. We changed the title of the paper to “Indiscreet Discretion? An Exploration of Why and How Employees Bend or Break Confidential Information Protection Rules.” We chose this title because one of the reviewers had suggested integrating the concept of discretion into the paper.

At the time, we believed we were making substantial changes. With the benefit of hindsight, I could see that these changes were not as substantial as we had thought. This unintentional rigidity could be explained by our attachment to our original ideas and our reluctance to entirely rewrite it. Reflecting back, once we had committed to changing the paper in a certain way, we should have been fully committed to those changes, and if we didn’t agree with those changes, we should have said so.

Editor: I received the manuscript back with the three reviewers’ comments. All three reviewers emphasized that substantial progress had been made. Two reviewers now recommended a low-risk revise and resubmit, whereas the third reviewer suggested a high-risk revision. My personal opinion was more negative at this stage. Although I agreed that progress had been made, it was more incremental than I had hoped for.

I also felt I needed to change the tone of my language a bit toward the authors. Looking back at the first letter I sent to the authors, it was clear that I had used quite subtle language, communicating in terms of “You might try this,” or “It might be interesting to go in that direction.” At this stage of the process, I had the feeling that I had to push the authors a bit more. In the second decision letter, I therefore started using language such as “You really need to do this.” As an editor, it is always difficult to make strong suggestions. On one hand, I wanted to make it clear that the authors really needed to make substantial changes. On the other hand, I did not want to impose specific solutions on them. They are the authors; they should decide. That’s a very difficult balance to work through as an editor.

At this stage, I also felt that, if they wanted to move on with their process model, they needed to use a clearer methodological template. As the field of qualitative research is getting more mature, several methodological templates have emerged providing scholars with particular guidelines on how to execute, analyze, and write down this kind of research. Again, suggesting authors to apply a particular template raised issues. On one hand, I’m not always comfortable with imposing templates on people as it might restrict their

creativity, but sometimes they can be very helpful. In this case, I really had the feeling the well-established Gioia template (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) would be very helpful for the authors to describe more clearly and transparently how they had developed their process model. In my decision letter, I therefore encouraged them to use this template more explicitly.

Second Revise and Resubmit: June 2014

Author: One thing I have learned from this retrospective examination is that I personally welcome strong suggestions from editors. In the editor’s original letter, he was using rather soft language. This time he said “I am quite surprised that you did not decide to” frame the paper in terms of rule following. This gave us a clearer direction for the paper. It also signaled that if we could take the paper in that direction, it would increase the likelihood that it would get accepted. Although I understand the concern about an editor not taking over the paper, and other authors may prefer less directive editors, my view is that as an author I can always push back or even withdraw the paper. In this case my coauthor and I were both comfortable with a rule following theoretical framing. We dug deeper into the data to enrich our theorizing and adopted the Gioia template in our analysis.

But at this point, we made the mistake of bringing “leaking confidential information” back into the picture, even putting it back into the title, which at this point was “Breaking (some of) the Rules: Why and How do Employees Leak Confidential Information?” The editor and reviewers had already correctly noted that we could not show that employees were actually leaking information, so we must have been still stuck on the idea that we were figuring out why people leak confidential information. Putting it back into the title was a mistake.

Editor: After this second revise and resubmit, all the reviewers were happy with the paper. One recommended accepting the paper and the other two had only minor suggestions. But I was not ready to accept it. This is the tricky part of being an editor: when three reviewers are ready to accept but you are not. My feeling was that the level of theorizing of the process model and the theoretical contribution of the paper was just not meeting our standards. I don’t want to know how David and Kirsten were thinking about me at that time. As an editor, we know that this will trigger some difficult reactions. At the same time, however, I just needed to push them one more time. In this way, I hoped that the paper could be at a level where it is ready to be accepted.

In this kind of situation, you start doubting yourself a bit. At *JMS*, however, we have the policy of involving a second editor when a paper goes through a number of rounds. So I asked one of my colleagues to also read the paper independent of all reviewer comments. So at that point this was a valuable step for me because I was a bit in

doubt: Was I being too tough on them or was I not? The second editor agreed with my view. He said, "Look, this manuscript is definitely interesting but it's still underdeveloped." In particular, this second editor also pointed to the need for stronger theorizing in the process model. This feedback gave me some additional support for my conclusion that we needed to go to another round. At this stage, I needed to make clear that, in terms of theoretical contribution and theorizing on the process, an additional fundamental step needed to be taken. I also realized that I needed to massage this message a bit to the authors. I therefore wrote an extensive decision letter to the authors, providing the opinions of the reviewers as well as my personal reasons why an additional revision was necessary. I also told the authors that, in the next round, I would make the final decision based on the changes that the authors were making. This implied that, despite the fact that all three reviewers were ready to accept the paper, I did not yet give a conditional acceptance message. Instead, the decision was framed as an additional round of revise and resubmit.

Third Revise and Resubmit: October 2014

Author: It was of course very tough getting the feedback that all three reviewers were on board but the editor was not. But after our initial frustrated reaction, we realized two things: (a) It's the editor asking, so if you want to get this published you need to satisfy him; (b) The editor wants to make the paper better. So we can improve the paper and get it published by getting it to where the editor thinks it needs to be.

One of the concerns that the editor expressed at this time was with the framing of the introduction. One very helpful thing he did was to point us toward a number of templates that we could follow. He didn't say, "you must pick this template," rather he alerted us to a special issue on process studies and encouraged us to choose one that we liked. We reviewed those papers, picked one that fits with our paper, and used it to help rewrite our introduction and other sections in the paper.

Another important issue was that, although we had taken the paper in a different direction, we still relied on the language and ideas from the initial submission, including material that no longer fit. So we made the sometimes painful choice of taking that material back out, working toward a more coherent, consistent manuscript.

Editor: My evaluation at this point was that the paper had met the standards of *JMS*. It wasn't perfect, but no paper is. I still saw some room for improvement in terms of structuring and framing the paper but these are not major steps, just minor issues. So I was ready to conditionally accept the paper.

Conditional Acceptance: December 2014

Author: I find the work on a conditional acceptance to be oddly painful because it's accepted but you still have to do the work. But we knew where the paper was going now, and the changes the editor was asking for were straightforward and mostly about improving the flow of the paper.

Editor: For me, conditional acceptance is not acceptance. I have had experiences where authors did not successfully address the issues that were mentioned in the conditional acceptance letter and where I had to give the authors an additional round of revision to address the final issues. But in this case, David and Kirsten did everything I asked them to do, allowing me to formally accept the manuscript for publication.

Reflections on the Entire Process

Author: It has been illuminating to reflect back on the entire process this paper went through and on the editor's perspective as well. My first conclusion is that it is critical for authors and editors to be on the same page with regard to the strategy for the revision. I now realize that we were fortunate to have a very engaged and helpful editor who had a clear idea of how to improve the paper. We should have done more to take advantage of that. In particular, right at the beginning, we should have developed a strategy for the revision and conferred with Dries to get his reaction to the strategy before launching into the process of actually working on the revision.

Second, it was fascinating to learn how Dries had some doubt and uncertainty during this process. In particular, he deliberated whether or not to make strong suggestions. Personally, I am glad that he made the suggestions. If an editor sees a problem and has a suggestion about how to fix it, I would like to hear it. I don't have to take that suggestion if I can think of a better approach. I'd also prefer to not be playing a game of "guess what the editor is going to like."

Third, I learned about the importance of rewriting the entire paper during review processes to make sure it is internally consistent. Once I agree to move the paper toward a desired destination, I need to mentally uncouple myself from my original ideas and carefully consider whether each one still fits.

Editor: First, I believe the role of the editor is more than just collecting the votes. So just because all the reviewers think it's good, I don't have to think it's good, and also the other way around: In some cases, the reviewers might be very skeptical but I see potential, so I would give it an R&R. In the end, an editor functions as the gatekeeper of a journal. This implies that an editor has to make sure that accepted papers meet particular quality standards, which sometimes involves making decisions that deviate from reviewers' input. Fortunately, such decisions are rather rare.

I think this particular paper is a nice example of a qualitative study that gradually evolved from being a concept-driven one to a process-driven one. As an editor, we get a lot of qualitative manuscripts where the initial version is mainly a collection of concepts, while the actual theorizing on the connections between the concepts remains absent. In their paper, on how to conduct high-quality inductive case study research, Gioia et al. (2013) clearly state that the data structure merely is the starting point for inductive theorizing, which should result into a process model that illuminates the connections between the core concepts. Unfortunately, authors often present the data structure as the final outcome of their inductive research. In this case, however, the authors were able to successfully move this study from a concept-based paper to a process paper.

As already mentioned, it's sometimes very difficult as an editor to find a good balance between, on the one hand, making clear to authors that they have to address certain issues, and, on the other hand, avoiding forcing things onto the authors. That's sometimes a difficult balance to strike, especially in a journal like *JMS* where we try to be inclusive and open toward a lot of methodological and theoretical approaches. In this case, I felt rather hesitant to really enforce the Gioia template on them. At the same time, I felt that applying it made a lot of sense. In the end, I therefore decided to make the strong suggestion to use this particular template.

Lessons for Systematic Improvement of the Reviewing Process

Author: During this retrospective examination, I have been able to speak directly with Dries and exchange e-mails and communications, regarding our shared experience of this review process. Although I have valued this retrospective learning experience, it would have been useful to have it concurrently with the process! One step that would enable a richer exchange of information between editors and authors would be to consider using richer communication media during a review process. Media richness theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Daft & Lengel, 1983) suggests that we should use richer media, such as face-to-face communication, when tasks are equivocal, meaning there are multiple possible interpretations of conflicting information (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). When there is equivocality in a review process, editors and authors should use richer media such as video or phone calls to communicate rather than the leaner media of response letters and e-mails.

A second lesson pertains to the "strong suggestions" discussion from earlier in the essay. Different authors are likely to have different preferences for the type of

feedback they prefer to receive. For example, some authors may prefer more latitude from editors, while others less tolerant of ambiguity may welcome strong suggestions. Similarly, different editors may have different styles, with some preferring to be more actively involved in a paper's development while others might simply count the votes of reviewers and advise authors of their decision. It seems likely that a review process where the preferences of authors and editors aligned would go more smoothly than one where those preferences clashed. Perhaps if authors and editors shared those preferences we could match editors and authors accordingly.

Editor: To generate a more constructive and developmental review process, I think it is important that authors realize that the role of an editor is different from the role of a reviewer. As an editor, you want to get papers published. This implies that editors appreciate a transparent and open communication with the authors, allowing editors to play a supportive role in helping authors to address the often-challenging process of revising papers. If feedback from the editor is unclear or if authors have the feeling that they need to address contradicting suggestions, contacting the editor for support or clarification actually makes a lot of sense. Authors also need to realize that, if editors give suggestions, they are just suggestions, not marching orders. So if you think there is a better way to address the issue, then take that way, and justify it well to convince the editor. If you follow the suggestions of an editor and it doesn't make sense, the editor will see that it doesn't make sense. In the end, the core purpose of a review process is to make papers better not to please editors or reviewers.

At the same time, I think it is crucial for editors to realize that they are more than just people who count the votes of reviewers. In my own experience as an author, I have had cases where editors took a very disengaged approach, providing limited justification for their decision or providing limited guidance on how to deal with the comments of different reviewers. In my opinion, being an editor entails important responsibilities in terms of making decisions that can substantially impact the careers of authors. I therefore think it is essential to provide clear feedback that goes beyond reporting the outcome of a voting process.

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