Electronic Publishing Demystified

Speaker:
Lynn Foster
American Heart Association
Dallas, Texas

Reporter:
Addieane Caileigh
Academic Medicine
Washington, DC

Lynn Foster described the 3-year process by which the American Heart Association (AHA) began to publish 5 journals (15,000 pages per year) in electronic form. The actual changeover from paper to electronic formats occurred in less than 2 years.

She advised anyone planning to undertake electronic publishing to ask 3 questions. 1) What processes do you control now? For example, you can control the format of manuscripts received and the format in which they are published. 2) What processes might you incorporate into your work system that would move you closer to electronic publishing when you decide to make the change? 3) What opportunities does the change to electronic publishing offer with respect to time-saving, redundancy in procedures (as in keystrokes and copyediting), and money-saving? She commented that, unlike others, she has found that electronic submission saves money by eliminating unnecessary keystrokes.

Foster said that the goal should be 100% electronic publication and that that can be reasonably accomplished with the products and services now available. Given that goal, changes can be introduced in comprehensive stages: one journal at a time; at that journal, one process (such as copyediting) at a time; within each process, one procedure at a time; and for each procedure, one person at a time. Staff considerations are especially important. She suggested that journals train their own staff rather than replacing present staff with new, electronically skilled persons.

She outlined the processes involved in producing an electronic journal: file conversion, manuscript tracking, preediting work, copyediting, postediting work, file transmission, scanning (figures and so on), and page composition. One of the secrets of a successful operation is appropriate preediting work, in which standardized formats are imposed, templates are attached, and extra elements (such as standard abbreviations) are added to the manuscript before the copyeditor works on it. She noted that the preediting work for all 5 AHA journals is done by one freelance who works part-time at home 20 to 25 hours per week.

In response to questions about the time and staff needed to convert to electronic publishing, Foster gave details about AHA’s 5 journals. She estimated that one journal could convert to all-electronic publishing in 8 months. The editorial-services staff consists of 10 freelance editors (some full-time, some part-time), 4 production editors, and 1 copyreader. She did not know how many staff members were involved in technical support for the computer systems and maintenance of the electronic journals.

Now that the 5 journals are published electronically, she and her staff are exploring further changes. They are experimenting with direct transmission from each journal’s editor’s office to the AHA production office. They are also testing the use of e-mail for sending manuscripts from authors to AHA and from the preediting freelance to AHA. They are considering whether to have authors do more of the preediting work. Finally, they are working to ensure that the AHA intranet is properly secure and reliable.

Staffing for a Brave New World

Speakers:
Dawn McCoy
Science
Washington, DC

Leslie Cameron
American Psychological Association
Washington, DC

Shelley Potler
Williams & Wilkins
Baltimore, Maryland

Reporter:
Laura King
American Medical Association
Chicago, Illinois

In Brave New World, Aldous Huxley describes a Utopia that breeds, clones, and conditions people for specific jobs. In today’s world, many managers are nearly desperate enough to consider Huxley’s ideas. Who could pass up hiring a born copyeditor? Who wouldn’t be tempted by the thought of cloning that perfect proofreader? And if training doesn’t work, why not condition the ultimate editor? Of course, Huxley shows that drastic measures yield deadly results. But how do we solve staffing problems in this brave new world of outsourcing, downsizing, and reengineering? Three editorial managers discussed the issue at the recent CBE meeting.

Shelley Potler discussed recruiting and hiring. Potler detailed what she looks for when hiring: background, salary requirements, and previous editing experience. She recommended using the application form as a screening tool by asking the following questions: Is the form completely filled out? Are there any unexplained time gaps? Is there employment stability and a progression in salary and job level? She cited messy forms and misspellings as red flags to the hirer. She warned that hiring at a lower salary could create employee dissatisfaction; however, the downsizing of the job market should be considered.

Potler also detailed what to look for on an applicant’s resume. She cautioned against resumes containing trivial data and quality-
ing statements, such as “assisted with” and “responsible for”, which sound impressive but mean nothing. She warned against hiring writers over editors, emphasizing that the skills are disparate. Potler concluded that closely screened applicants are easier to train and retain.

Leslie Cameron concurred with Potler on the importance of screening. Cameron discussed the interview as the most telling part of the hiring process, particularly when companies prohibit applicant testing. She recommended second interviews with second reviewers and described the process as a chance for candidates to reveal themselves. She advised interviewers to follow their instincts. Her advice was, “Don’t settle.”

One of Cameron’s main concerns was how to keep the good person. She offered several recommendations:
• Reward employees with small tokens, such as baseball tickets, mugs, and pencils; decorate for birthdays; and write thank-you notes.
• Support employee-assistance programs, which help employees with personal problems.
• Form working groups with nonmanagerial members to address problems.
• Encourage professional development.
• Terminate poor performers because they create a negative atmosphere.
• Accommodate people’s personal lives.

Dawn McCoy was also concerned with retention but added that turnover can often be healthy. When an employee is promoted within the company, it shows that advancement is possible. Promoted editorial staffers take their skills to other departments, often making work easier for editors. Turnover also provides an opportunity to rethink department structures, thereby streamlining work flow.

McCoy, like Potler and Cameron, emphasized the importance of hiring the right person for the job, saying, “Hold out for the best candidate you can find.” She recommended preventive hiring, which she defined as hiring the overqualified if they have skills that you might use later. With current staff, she suggested identifying those who are not afraid of change and reassuring those who are.

Today’s brave new world of publishing is not as dire as the world that Huxley created, but it is fraught with contemporary problems regarding staffing. Short of breeding, cloning, and conditioning, how do we hire and retain the right employee? According to Potler, Cameron, and McCoy, the savvy manager hires smart, trains thoroughly, and rewards often. And as McCoy said, “Be one step ahead of the game, even when you don’t know what the game is.”

Qualitative Research: Boot Camp for Editors

Speaker:
Valerie Florance
University of Rochester Medical Center
Rochester, New York

Reporter:
Peggy Robinson
Canadian Medical Association
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

During the Philadelphia CBE meeting, a friend lamented the lack of knowledge about “best practices” in the editing profession. Knowledge based on thorough research about such factors as the order of editorial tasks and the physical environment. We all develop personal systems, and some of these have been codified and published, but is there any research to back up the recommendations? Valerie Florance, in her “boot camp for editors”, introduced the concepts and methods of qualitative research, which just might be appropriate for this type of inquiry. Through her experience in both anthropology and information sciences, Florance has developed a well-organized approach to this complex topic.

In the 2-session presentation, editors accustomed to dealing with the IMRAD system learned that many of its principles simply do not apply in qualitative research. There is no null hypothesis; the study design is emergent, developing as the study proceeds; and the researcher is overtly acknowledged as a component of the study. Furthermore, the researcher takes a holistic approach to the situation under study, rather than trying to isolate a single factor. Thus, prediction and control are impossible; instead, comprehensive understanding of a culture or of learning methods, for example, is the goal.

As its name implies, qualitative research does not rely on quantitative analytic techniques, such as statistical procedures. Instead, enormous data sets are reduced by coding methods, and the researcher looks for patterns while preparing a descriptive report. The report is then discussed with the participants (qualitative research typically involves human subjects) to ensure that the analysis makes sense to them, even if they don’t agree with the conclusions (what Florance calls the “Aha! test”).

Qualitative research can take the form of case studies, surveys (for example, using guided interviews or questionnaires), historical-document analyses, standardized observational research (for which coding, the assignment of descriptive labels, might be needed), ethnography, and so on. The data might consist of words, images, sounds or records of behavior, or some combination of these.

Such studies yield “tons of data”—for example, hours of taped interviews. The researcher must then annotate the field notes gathered during the sessions with participants, look for and code the concepts in the