

The new paradigm: feedback is not required

We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve (Bill Gates, Ted Talk, May 2013).

Introduction

This year, I start my 37th year involved with the *Journal of Property Investment & Finance (JPIF)*, initially as the assistant editor and latterly as the editor. In that time, I have seen the academic publishing world change beyond recognition.

When I started “cut and paste” had a literal meaning. I would receive the typeset galleys (an unformatted sheet of the printed articles produced on old fashioned plates) and I would spend the best part of a day cutting them and pasting them to individual pages. These would then be returned to the typesetter (in physical form) and the paper copy of the journal would be printed from my draft layouts. It was a long and laborious process. Nowadays, papers are now published online as they are accepted and then allocated to a specific issue after publication. It is a very different world.

Likewise, the refereeing procedure was all done with multiple hard copies and the Royal Mail. It took much longer and often was in handwriting that then had to then be transcribed into the review to be sent back to the author(s), just in case that the possibility of recognising someone's handwriting diluted the double blind refereeing process. But it all worked and, in my view, the fact that the author had to invest a lot of time in ensuring that the paper copy of their work was well presented and well written made the standard of submissions a little bit higher.

Nowadays, everything is electronic and for some reason that has made the attention to detail in the submissions less rigorous. There are a greater number of typos and spelling errors; there are more cases of the author including their name on the actual document for review and, sadly, there is much less attention to the house style requirements of the journal. You would think that it would be the opposite as “grammar checks” and “spell checkers” become the norm but, I think, this just negates the skill of the author proof reading their own paper before submission. Indeed, probably half of the papers that are reviewed are returned with the comment of “poor English” (even to native English speakers) or “please proof read before resubmitting”. Electronic expediency sadly leads to lower standards.

Another change in submissions is that the number of papers submitted that are not ready to be sent for review has increased substantially. Once upon a time, I would send all papers for review by the editorial board; nowadays, it is probably, only 60 per cent of submissions that are of a standard suitable for review. I would not waste the time of my editorial board members by sending them incomplete, poorly written, poorly explained and poorly referenced papers. I am even receiving at least ten papers a year that are not even on the topic of “Property investment”. It is frustrating and time consuming.

More worryingly, there is now a trend in journals for the author to recommend the referee. I simply do not understand that. The merit of double blind refereeing is to ensure that there is not any “relationship” between the writer and the reviewer. Obviously, the referee will be familiar with the work of a previous published author (it would be worrying if they were not) but they would not be sure that the current paper is by the same author. But a direct recommendation by the author to tell the editor to whom they should send the paper for review is, in my mind, an abdication of the role of the editor and undermines the whole reviewing process.



So what is the point of my editorial? Change happens and, as with all things, some of that is for the better and some for the worse. That said, there does seem to be a tendency of the previous generation to think that the new way of doing things by the next generation is not as good as it used to be. I might fall into that category when talking about pop music but with the journal, I hope that I can see things objectively. Many of the changes with electronic submissions have greatly improved the speed of reviewing papers but there has been one very interesting change that I cannot countenance. And that is the new trend of when a paper is returned with suggestions for revisions, the authors simply send the original paper to another journal for publication hoping that the new reviewers will accept the paper without change. And often they do and the paper is published unimproved.

I have always believed that academic journals were there to help progress the literature and the careers of younger faculty. If a journal asks for revisions, it is always in an attempt to improve the paper and, as a consequence, help the authors' exposition of their research. Surely that is a good thing that should be applauded.

As a result, I can now, with a very high degree of accuracy, predict which papers will be resubmitted and which will, without even the courtesy of an e-mail of explanation, never be seen at *JPIF* again. Give it two to three months and the very same paper will be published in another journal without any change (and often with the same spelling mistakes and grammatical errors that were pointed out in the unused *JPIF* review). Not so much "publish and be damned" more "publish regardless".

The natural corollary to this is that many authors will seek out highly ranked journals and follow the normal revision norms of publication. This should be a good thing but, that it self opens the Pandora's Box of determining the ranking of journals (which is outwith the ambit of this editorial).

I guess that the whole point of my discussion here is that I am worried that the merits of academic publishing, at least in our subject area, are being dulled. It seems to me that rigour and objectiveness is being diluted and the publication process is at risk of becoming simply that, a process. Surely the role of academia and journals in particular is to be the guardian of standards and rigour and to encourage the next generation of authors to take things forward with clarity and a clear exposition of their new research? I am not convinced that this will be the outcome of the changes happening now.

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