

Reviewing is a business transaction

BY ELEFTHERIOS P. DIAMANDIS

I work at least 12 hours per day. I also spend two hours at home answering e-mails. Almost every day, one of these e-mails is a request for a review. My success in science is haunting me! People know that I am an expert in a few things, and they are asking me to review papers all the time. Let us count. I get 300 requests for review per year. Each review requires three to four hours to complete, and if I were to accept those I would devote one to two days per week to this.

One reason for doing a review is that others are reviewing my papers, so I should contribute to the pool. If I publish 20 to 30 papers per

year, and I review the same, I am on par. But as I just mentioned, I do not have the time. And who would ever care if I did a review? Reviewing is not a highly recognizable activity, and it requires a lot of time. I could see my administrator saying, "Why are you wasting your time

reviewing other people's papers and not concentrating on what you are paid for?" I know I will not get a promotion by reviewing other people's work. If I do win the reviewer-of-the-year award from a journal, I have a feeling that my colleagues will say, "Look at him: He is wasting his time, and he is rewarded for it."

I believe that the current practice of reviewing is wrong. This is an important service requested by journals (many of them publish for profit), but they want it for free. Reviewers of highly successful and profitable journals do not get a share, despite being part of the success. As time goes by, as journals proliferate and as people become busier, their appetite to review any paper, for any journal, diminishes greatly. The only way I can see a revival of this activity is to consider it as a business transaction.

If journals want my time, they should pay for it. With

a four-hour slot per paper and \$50 per hour as a modest remuneration, a review is worth \$200. Prospective reviewers will be more inclined to do a very good job if they know that they will be paid. More importantly, retired scientists with great expertise and a lot of free time will be keen to participate to make some money on the side. If I do 20 reviews per year at \$200 per review, I will make \$4,000. I could use this money to buy back some personal pleasure. For example, I could buy a billiards table, a pinball machine or a fancy treadmill without having to ask my wife's permission to do so.

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Who would pay for this service? There are two parties interested in the process, the author and the journal, and they should split the cost equally. If the process is futile (the paper is rejected), they both lose, and if it is fruitful (the paper is accepted), they both win. The reviewer wins too. I do not think a

\$200 reviewing expense for an author is a high one, considering that publishing in an open-access journal costs between \$1,000 and \$2,000. I suspect that conversion to this system will make everybody happy. Editors will not have to beg reviewers to do the job for free, and they likely will get a good service in terms of speed and quality.

Bottom line: Reviewing should be a paid service governed by the laws of supply and demand. I am glad some companies and publishers are beginning to implement these or similar ideas (1).

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REFERENCE

1. <http://www.nature.com/news/company-offers-portable-peer-review-1.12418>

Perceptions matter

Would reviewer compensation undermine public credibility?

BY PETER J. KENNELLY

When I hear scientists propose that reviewers be compensated, I do not dismiss the idea out of hand. After all, I typically review 30 to 50 manuscripts a year, so at \$50 or \$100 a pop ... After all, a good reviewer brings years of training and experience to the evaluation of scientific work and spends quality time reading, reflecting and generating feedback on a manuscript. Many publishers directly profit from my voluntary contributions to the vetting of research papers, so why not stop the exploitation of my public spirit and let me share the wealth?

While there is some merit to the idea of compensating professionals for their service, there is peril as well. Peer review is one of the cornerstones of science. We differentiate ourselves from the vast array

of consultants, advisers, forecasters and other experts because we put our ideas and experiments to the test both at the bench and among our peers. If people perceive that the peer-review system has been compromised, our community stands to lose much of its ability to inform and enlighten. We become just another set of so-called experts.

We tend to credit those individuals foolish enough to take on thankless tasks of no apparent personal benefit voluntarily and repeatedly with positive, even altruistic, motivations. The perceived thanklessness and onerousness of uncompensated peer-review service enhances, admittedly with essentially circumstantial evidence, the

perception that referees attempt to be objective and fair.

The idea that scientists are being paid to give the thumbs up or thumbs down on each other's work would offer potent ammunition for skeptics and critics of all kinds. For those who believe the peer-review system is fundamentally flawed, the equation "money = corruption" will seem as logical as "2 + 2 = 4." The suspicion that a reviewer might alter his or her standards, even unconsciously, in an effort to curry favor with editors for financial

gain is a recipe for disaster. Certainly those who are pushing the replacement of peer-reviewed journals by unvetted research blogs would seize immediately on reviewers for hire as a cudgel for advancing their agenda.

In the end, science derives its credibility and funding from the perception

that the work we publish is the product of a system that employs, as one of its integral components, a mechanism for objective, self-correcting quality control. While there are some publications and institutions that do compensate reviewers, in considering the idea of making reviewer compensation universal, it is not really important whether scientists think it is a reasonable idea. What is really important is how it will play with John and Mary Q. Public and the persons they elect to public office.

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