

Optical Engineering

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Reviewers

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Reviewers

Several weeks ago, a colleague of mine made an interesting proposal as we met for breakfast during a business trip to Washington, D.C. He had recently heard that I was asked to serve as editor-in-chief for *Optical Engineering*, and wanted to express his concern with the difficulty in finding suitable technical reviewers for submitted manuscripts. In his opinion, all authors should also serve as reviewers since they receive the benefit of this service provided by their peers. His proposed solution is to make it compulsory to serve as a technical reviewer, and to enforce the policy by rejecting manuscripts from authors who do not comply.

Technical reviewers are indeed the unsung heroes of peer-reviewed journals. A good reviewer may provide hours of volunteer service to thoroughly scrutinize a single manuscript. Sometimes, the review process can involve multiple iterations and even contentious give and take with authors. Unlike authors and editorial board members, whose names are prominently displayed in the journal when the manuscript is finally published, reviewers toil in anonymity. Their efforts, however, are vital to maintaining the quality and integrity of scientific journals, as an objective peer-review process is foundational to them. Therefore, I was inspired by the discussion with my colleague to draw attention to the important role of reviewers, and to consider actions that can enhance the ranks of qualified and active technical reviewers.

You may find interest in some statistics concerning technical reviewers for *Optical Engineering*. Associate editors have access to a reviewer database containing many

thousands of scientists and engineers, of whom 1,957 actively performed 3,088 manuscript reviews in 2013. This averages to about 1.5 manuscripts per active reviewer every year, with some individuals reviewing seven or eight papers in a single year. The average time for a technical review is 15 days. When requests are sent to candidate reviewers identified by associate editors, 39% percent of contacted reviewers agree to perform the review, 37% decline for various reasons, and 24% do not respond. These numbers suggest to me that the journal enjoys a large number of diligent reviewers who make the time to provide this valuable service.

I strongly agree with my colleague's position that performing technical reviews in one's area of expertise is a professional society service to which all scientists and engineers should give some priority, especially those who author papers in peer-reviewed journals. Based on my experience to date as a member of the *Optical Engineering* editorial board, I also concur that finding suitable reviewers can sometimes be difficult, with many candidates declining due to competing commitments or perhaps just lack of interest. I was pleasantly surprised, however, to see that almost two out of five potential reviewers accept the request. This is a testament to both the dedication of the reviewers and the competence of the associate editors in identifying appropriate ones.

With all due respect to my colleague, enforcing a compulsory policy for manuscript reviews is fraught with difficulties and fortunately does not appear to be needed. I do not foresee adopting the proposal. Instead, I hope that highlighting the importance of this issue might encourage more readers and authors to volunteer to serve as reviewers, either by simply accepting the request the next time that they are contacted by an associate editor of *Optical Engineering* or even by actively contacting an associate editor aligned with their technical expertise to express their interest. I have also become motivated by the statistics to consider ways to give some recognition to reviewers who go above and beyond the call of duty, such as those who are performing seven or eight reviews a year. I have always preferred the carrot to the stick, and think that our authors might appreciate that.

Michael T. Eismann
Editor-in-Chief