

Pay Me, Pal!

Tony Grift

Almost every morning when I check my email, there is another invitation to review a paper. I used to politely turn down review requests from journals that I'd never heard of, but now I just right-swipe these emails into the trash. I realize that finding qualified reviewers has become a problem, with so many new journals in print, and ASABE is not immune. I saw that problem firsthand when I co-authored a paper for *Transactions of the ASABE*. After 18 months, the Associate Editor told us that he couldn't find any reviewers, sorry. At another journal, the editor went a step further. After two years, he told us that he couldn't find reviewers and, based on that, implied that our paper was not worth publishing. Yikes! I also submitted a paper for which the editor could find only one reviewer, a statistician who hammered on the numbers and ignored the technical content. Clearly, the volunteer peer-review system is not working. So, let me offer a blunt engineering solution: pay me to review!



To test this innovative concept, I responded to review requests from a few obscure journals by saying that I now charge \$10 per page. That did not stop the flood of invitations (they must have right-swiped my response), but one journal told me that they had taken me off their potential reviewer list. Pardon me? Are they really implying that my review of a ten-page paper is not worth 100 bucks? So it seems.

Why do journals expect us academic saps to do this work for free? Are they poor? No, they aren't. Reed Elsevier recently reported a pre-tax profit of approximately 1.1 billion Euros (being aware of the tax brackets in the Netherlands, I recommend moving the headquarters to the Cayman Islands, but that's another story). Seriously, what is left of the argument that poor Elsevier, or any other publisher, needs to rely on an army of volunteers to vet their manuscripts?

Some administrators might argue that reviewing papers is part of my job. It comes with being a professional, and I have to show some loyalty (I find that rather hypocritical, since loyalty is scant among the highest echelons of organizations, but that's for another day). And sometimes the system actually

works. I recently co-authored a paper on which the reviewers did a fantastic job. At the second revision, instead of calling us stubborn (or stupid), they stayed calm and even apologized for not being clear in the first revision. That paper was much stronger for their efforts. In particular, ASABE's volunteer reviewers are wonderful people who care about the Society and our profession.

But that's not the point. I'm also a loyal long-time ASABE member, and as a trained engineer, I need to optimize everything (and I'm writing this article for free, so there).

The point is that the current system is obsolete and ineffective, and there is an easy fix. Pay people small amounts for small jobs. An incentive of just \$100 to review a ten-page paper will make me do it faster, much better, and by the deadline. The same goes for a weekend-long review of a proposal at, say, \$750. If I get inundated with pay-based review requests, I will gradually raise my price until I reach a comfortable equilibrium (how American of me). Over time, this will create a market mechanism in which the best reviewers get paid the most, and I hope to be among them. We will no longer have these frustrating delays in the review process, the reviews will be much more thorough (and not handed off to an unsuspecting post-doc), and the quality of the literature will improve. This isn't rocket science, friends: you get what you pay for.

I'm sure there are technical hurdles to the payment process, but these are the days of PayPal, Apple Pay, and bitcoin (don't pay me with that one). The days of wiring funds through Wells Fargo are over. Maybe you can send me review invitations with a downloadable remittance already attached. I'm sure some bright IT person can make it happen. If you don't trust that I'll pay taxes on the income, then consider me an independent contractor. I'll be waiting for my 1099 in the mail. Whatever you have to do, just pay me, pal! You'll be glad you did.

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