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Zooming In, Zooming Out: Reflections on the 2021 ISMTE Global Virtual Event

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In Unprecedented Times

On December 4, 2019, I left a well-paying but ill-fitting job in tech sales to begin work at J&J Editorial, an academic publishing and peer review management company in Cary, North Carolina. I split my time between in-office training and working from home, back when that was a perk and not a necessity. I had just enough time to put names with faces within the organization before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the company quickly shifted to an entirely remote working model.

Many people have found themselves in similar positions in these unprecedented times—starting new jobs or assuming new responsibilities in an entirely digital publishing landscape. It is, of course, a blessing to be employed during a pandemic that has contributed to vast amounts of joblessness, and a gift to be employed by a company that values safety and has the resources to sustain nearly two years of an entirely remote workforce. However, there are nonetheless new challenges to navigate and new hurdles to clear for these new employees to grow at the same rate as their predecessors.

In the first months of the pandemic, it was critical to simply make it through each day. Make adjustments to workflows, support clients, keep everything running. It was easy (and completely understandable) for professional development to fall to the wayside. This is why participation in various publishing societies, like ISMTE, is so critical—especially at a time like this. I was selected along with several other J&J employees to attend the global virtual event this year, which took place in early October over Airmeeet—a video conferencing platform. It was my first time at an industry conference, and I wasn't sure what to expect. Now a few months removed, I can see just how much value comes from an event like this and the way that it provided a dedicated time to connect with others across the industry, expanding the view of the field from beyond a single office into a much larger, much more detailed landscape. In doing so, the ISMTE conference helped to make sense of the day-to-day minutia of the editorial office by providing context for operations, which enables more informed conversations, better client support, and more proactivity moving forward.

Zooming In

As an entirely virtual event, the ISMTE conference mimicked my traditional workday. I do every part of my job online and have several Zoom calls a week, both with my direct team and externally with other journal stakeholders. It has become so normalized at this point that I no longer spend much time actively thinking about it. However, it's undeniable that it has shaped my experience and the experiences of several other newer employees in distinctive ways.

In this regard, one of the sessions I found most helpful was "*Face Masks & Offer Letters: Starting a New Role in a Pandemic.*" Though my initial onboarding took place face-to-face in late 2019, I was introduced to and trained on the majority of my current projects via Zoom calls. Hearing others echo the associated challenges and concerns of digital training and integration into a company's social environment reminded me of the importance of being my own advocate for professional growth and for seeking out additional opportunities to connect with my colleagues since networking is perhaps less organic than it used to be in in-office environments.

The session also affected me as someone who has begun to have a hand in training new hires—many of whom have never stepped foot in our physical office. While reflecting on my own experiences with training has been helpful, hearing others' experiences encouraged me to consider the importance of developing a more comprehensive digital onboarding pedagogy that addresses the specific anxieties about starting at a new company or within a new role at this point in the pandemic. Simply acknowledging that such anxieties exist makes for a more open channel of communication and increased accessibility which will, in turn, promote not only a better social experience but also more cohesive, efficient work across a shared project.

However, the ISMTE Global Virtual Event not only advocated the benefits of early-career networking within an internal, company-contained context; they promoted external networking through various social components integrated into the conference itself. There were ample networking sessions where participants could interface with other publishing professionals in attendance and synchronous chat functions and discussion forums that allowed for more focused conversation about session topics at hand. These had several benefits, but what I found most helpful was how they enabled awareness of and connection between those who work within different roles in this same industry. We may all work within technical editing in some capacity, but not every business performs the same function or provides the same services. And it's easy to cultivate an insular view of the industry, informed by your day-to-day experience when

you are solely working from behind a computer screen. But ISMTE and all who were involved with planning this global event obviously worked very diligently to humanize the various elements and roles that come together to keep us collectively moving forward, evolving to meet the demands of the academic and professional communities we serve.

Zooming Out

This said, the ISMTE Global Virtual Event was far more than a networking opportunity; it also provided a comprehensive overview of crucial, big-picture elements of the field. This was an aspect that I appreciated, because so far in my pursuit to learn more about managing and technical editing, it has been hard to know where to begin or when you're actually supposed to have the time to look into it at all. It's a global industry with extensive and ever-evolving conventions, and it's rapidly-paced. The transfer and dissemination of knowledge speeds up more every day as we become an increasingly digital society. The editorial office has to rise to the occasion, answering the call for faster processing times without compromising the extensive support we provide nor the high levels of accuracy expected. The nature of the industry lends itself to detail-oriented folks such as myself, who can quickly become experts at the day-to-day minutia of our jobs. We can check in new manuscripts quickly, we can identify formatting errors with a glance, and we have email templates saved for nearly every occasion. These are undoubtedly important tasks—they keep projects afloat. However, I think it's easy to mistake that comfort with our journal or society as knowledge about the industry as a whole. And the issue is that the two are not interchangeable.

Partaking in the ISMTE Global Virtual Event gave people a chance to pause and zoom out, so to speak, in order to look at the larger landscape. With sessions like *"Putting the Journal Impact Factor into Perspective"* and *"Plan S & the Editorial Office: Why Should I Care?"*, newer folks are able to find meaning behind the terms they hear and the services they provide on a daily basis. Taking stock of this meaning is what separates fine and efficient employees—who limit their focus to the day-to-day tasks—from proactive ones who are able to think beyond the present moment and make sense of data, identify trends in the metrics, generate sustainable protocols, and problem-solve to meet specific needs.

ISMTE's promotion of this big-picture industry thinking has produced real, tangible results in my own understanding of my projects and my workflows. For instance, I manage a newer title that is still in the process of applying for an impact factor. And as it stands, acquiring peer reviewers for manuscripts in this journal feels nearly

impossible sometimes. Regardless of debates about impact factors as reliable identifiers of journal quality, it is undeniable that they affect how a journal's prestige is perceived. And reviewer motivation can be largely impacted by that perception of prestige. Now, I remember learning what an impact factor *was* early in my career, but I didn't necessarily understand why it mattered so much. But after attending the ISMTE conference and participating in sessions that focused on related topics—not just on impact factor, but also on reviewer practices in general—I feel more equipped to offer proactive solutions to generate and retain reviewer engagement. Recently, we have worked to overhaul our reviewer invitation templates to include more language about what the journal has accomplished *despite* not having an impact factor yet, and the editors' level of personalization within each invitation has increased. This seems to have garnered additional attention and more reviewer commitments, which will help us as we continue to grow as a journal.

This is one of the major benefits of attending the ISMTE conference, though—through the discussions had about big-picture meaning and varying practices across other similar projects, our repository of industry knowledge increases, and we become more proficient problem solvers who can tailor our day-to-day operations in order to more proactively support the project's larger goals. We become better employees.

Final Reflections

Attending the ISMTE Global Virtual Event would be of immense value for any employee within their first few years in the managing and technical editing industry. As newcomers, and particularly as newcomers in this day and age, it can often feel difficult to find big-picture professional development opportunities outside of the employee's company. But events such as this offer both invaluable networking experiences where we can learn by hearing from others in the field talk about their respective jobs, and also more focused conversations around important issues and conventions that allow us to grow into big-picture thinkers and ultimately become more proactive contributors to our ever-evolving and ever-expanding industry.

Disclosure statement

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.