

Diversity of Minds in Cross-Training Editorial Staff: A Guinea Pig's Perspective

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Cross-training can be viewed as a scary concept, with implementation often causing hesitation. Either an employee is comfortable in their job tasks and unlikely to volunteer to take on increasing duties—"clock in and out" as the saying goes—or the employer overburdens workers to avoid hiring additional, necessary staff. However, with the right people, the right attitude, and the right approach, this need not be the case.

Take my experience in cross-training with the editorial offices of the American Heart Association, for instance. As Editorial Assistant at *Circulation Research*, I regularly handled processing new manuscript submissions, sending decision letters to authors, and was trained on contacting potential reviewers. Though originally siloed, expanding portfolios necessitated cross-training between a few of the journals in the AHA. Promotions, vacations, and newly open positions also left work piling up. All hands were needed to keep the wheels turning and, over the course of a year, I was given the opportunity to begin assisting *Stroke*, *Circulation: Quality and Outcomes*, *Circulation: Heart Failure*, *Circulation: Cardiovascular Imaging*, and *Circulation: Cardiovascular Interventions*. More than familiar with the shared web platform through my position at *Circulation Research*, I could easily assist from my home office during these lags.

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There's an idea that the scientific journals are similar enough, especially within an organization; if you've worked on one, you've practically done them all. Yet it became clear that each journal possesses its own signature, derived from its editorial team, a daily ebb and flow to maintain a long-established harmony. To disregard this entirely would do no more than to throw a wrench in a system already in need. I had to find a balance between bringing my experience to the table and being open to learning from what was there.

Happily, my colleagues prepared notes. Half preferred using bullets while others numbered their instructions.

Some featured screenshots as visual aids, and included tables of the editors' institutions to highlight conflicts of interest. Reviewing the notes, making additions and edits along the way for my own clarity, I wondered at how the journals' basic processes differed. How was communication and troubleshooting handled? Who took the lead, and who acted as the safety net?

Stroke: Crucial Attention to Detail

When I first met the Managing Editor of *Stroke*, Rebecca Seastrong, I didn't realize that I was meeting my future role model in the queen of attention-to-detail. As I began cross-training under *Stroke*, she apologized when emailing her "messy" notes typed up at the last-minute. Never mind that they were a detailed instructions of operations organized in a clean, visually appealing manner.

Well-aware that such focus appears cumbersome to those who work best on the fly, at its core, this quality showcases the care involved in one's work. Everything is reviewed with a fine-tooth comb to ensure the best possible outcome.

"Are there any notes that will affect the letter?" Rebecca asked. "Does the decision match the editor comments or, if there are reviews, do the reviewers' comments seem to uphold the recommendation? If there are reviews, do they need to be rated? All these questions and staff has not even opened a draft letter yet!"

In essence, what some may dismiss as minute details are, in fact, pertinent to form a strong foundation upon which to build success, no matter the industry. For myself, I always welcome the chance to work with such an individual.

Circulation: Essential Teamwork

When colleagues work really well together, over time they might appear interchangeable. I couldn't count the number of times I've been called by another coworker's name, or vice versa. "It's great to have someone you can relate to and collaborate with on a professional and casual level," Sara O'Brien said of her coworker, Molly Klemarczyk, both Assistant Managing Editors of *Circulation*. "We can be each other's sounding boards," Molly added. Such "work besties" are a prime example of a solid, complementary team.

Perhaps it's because *Circulation* receives approximately 5,000 manuscript submissions annually that the staff interacts

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with a multitude of personalities on a daily basis. Sara and Molly excel in this. They know which editors often request an additional reviewer to make a decision on a paper. Or who is normally on top of things, but maybe just forgot to mention they were on a tropical vacation with spotty internet service (oh to be burdened with such a quandary). They are familiar with who needs gentle, frequent reminders to turn in their reviews, and who needs a firm kick.

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It would be difficult to teach such communication instincts, not to mention colleague amiability, in a traditional setting. The ability to interact seamlessly with others and drawing on one's experience with different personalities is invaluable. Over time, practice becomes habit. What comes natural to some can be learned by others, and then incorporated into other aspects of the work environment.

Cross-Training in Practice

Ultimately, when you're spinning a number of plates in the air and everything is going well, it seems silly to hand a plate off to someone else. What do you have to benefit if a plate crashes to the ground in the process? Great leadership involves knowing which plate can be handed off, and specifically to whom. The entirety of a company, or even a department, cannot rest in the hands of one person at all times and be considered successful.

It is, then, an honor to be given a measure of trust to ease the burden of great workloads. Even when brought on for only a week to cover a vacation, working with Christine Beaty, Managing Editor of both *Circulation: Quality and Outcomes* and *Circulation: Heart Failure*, I was already well suited to hit the ground running. Christine, who also cross-trained under *Stroke*, commented on the benefits of such practice. "It's like an insurance policy...if my editorial assistant has an emergency or otherwise has to take paid time off, I can delegate some of his tasks so that I don't get deluged, and it takes some weight off my shoulders."

As I cross-trained under the various journals, I wondered what important work these individuals focused on when freed of excess tasks, namely those intermittent lags or temporary projects where it didn't make sense to hire additional staff. How putting in the work of cross-training affords an organization adaptability when it is needed. "No one can predict when those kinds of stressful situations are going to collide," Molly said. "Being as short-staffed as we were, we had even less time to spend training someone from the ground up." On training experienced journal employees, Rebecca noted that it "is certainly less challenging and time consuming than training a new employee...one of the great advantages of experienced staff is that they will be more likely to flag potential errors and question actions that seem incorrect." She further credited learning new functions within the shared web platform, and changes made to *Stroke's* workflow, based on her cross-training experiences.

The Take-Home

Back at *Circulation Research*, there has been a shift in my thinking. Not so much a competitive comparison between journals, but an appreciation of what is done differently, as well as valuing both the flexibility and reliability of my direct colleagues. This fresh perspective goes forward asking the never-ending question: What can be improved upon? "The experience of cross-training makes me (at times uncomfortably!) aware that some workflows are not as efficient as they could be, and I'm always interested in ways to improve." Christine said.

Each business, and each department, must approach this question in its own way. However, cross-training explores the many different routes from point A to point B to find the best possible way of maintaining momentum without necessarily giving up the original commute. If a traffic jam were to occur, as they often do, another road is available to provide an alternative to stopping completely.

It is a small investment for an organization to create opportunities for its employees to learn something new. Encouraging a diversity of minds strengthens each individual's knowledge, allowing a business to grow stronger and remain relevant, if we momentarily abandon the rut-in-the-road and embark on a different path.

Call for Submissions

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