
RICHARD P. GRANT

Why I said no to peer review this summer

Taking a well-earned break will benefit your productivity in the long run, says **Jennifer Rohn**.

I am sitting on the sunny back patio, listening to the call of the swifts and watching my five-year-old son pick and eat blackberries along the garden wall. With a phone in one hand and a cold drink in the other, I glance at my social-media feed and notice a post from a biologist exhorting her followers to carry on with peer review, even if they're on holiday. I feel a sudden worry that this plea is directed at me personally, as referee requests stack up in my inbox.

Earlier in my career, a tweet like this might have propelled me back inside the house to fire up my e-mail, accept review requests and start reading. After all, many researchers use the summer holidays to consolidate their projects and queue up submissions that will bolster their grant applications, because funding deadlines flock around the year's end. One of my own postdocs submitted his manuscript for review just this week, mostly because I could find time to work on his final draft only when the dust of the academic year had finally settled. But having this paper accepted and published quickly would surely help our next bid with a major funder.

I no longer feel I have a moral obligation to peer review during my time off. It has taken me years of soul-searching, as I've moved up through the ranks to become an established group leader, to reach this point. (A fortunate thing, because the more senior you are, the more referee requests flood in.)

In theory, we all have a duty to keep the wheels of peer review spinning. There is an unspoken pact of reciprocity in our tight-knit research community. Science has long operated like this: the expectation is that for every paper of mine being poked and prodded at by peers, I'm spending a roughly equal amount of time inspecting work by others. And because I know it's frustrating to wait for a decision on a paper, why would I want to irritate a colleague by causing delays?

My friend John Cairns, the late molecular biologist, used to tell me of the old-school days when scientists sent manuscripts to one another through the post. The hand-written draft would be inspected, and then sent back to the author. After a round of corrections, the paper could be accepted by *Nature* the following week. At that time, the number of academics was sufficient to handle the amount of papers that needed to be reviewed.

Those days are long gone. The number of journals climbs ever upwards, as does the quantity of papers appearing in them. Scientists need to publish as much as possible to boost their chances of being hired, promoted and funded. In prestigious journals, submissions will go through two or three, or sometimes even more, revisions before being deemed acceptable — and each version requires a referee report. The result: increasing demand for 24/7 peer review.

In my experience running a lab at University College London, one of the largest universities in the United Kingdom, review requests come alongside an ever-intensifying clamour for my time. My decade at the university has seen a steep rise in teaching load, mentoring duties and mindless administrative tasks — and don't get me started on committee meetings. As acceptance rates for grants go down, the number of applications that I have to submit goes up.

Alongside these chores, I supervise a team of half a dozen people, work with an industrial partner, attend conferences, manage multiple collaborations and keep my own publications moving. Such a collection of duties is not atypical for academics, and, like many of my colleagues, the hours I must work to stay afloat always spill into my evenings and weekends.

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That means I seldom take the holiday time owed to me. When I step away from the lab in the summer, I spend the first week washed up on a beach of exhaustion. Each day, I still have to chip away at academic chores that cannot wait, because they are keeping my lab alive. But even those few hours in my study don't go unnoticed. Most days, my son asks, "Mama, are you working again?" In the face of this, spending even more time doing peer review doesn't feel like an option.

Why not just farm out those referee requests to junior colleagues and frame it as a valuable training exercise? I do this sometimes, but in moderation (and with appropriate input from me and full disclosure to the journal). Although not as well documented as in graduate students, mental-health issues are still a worry in postdocs. I cannot in good conscience unload my burdens onto their stressed shoulders. Having been trained and inspired by a PhD supervisor who emphasized the importance of work–life balance, I respect the downtime of those on my team.

So instead of accepting referee requests and making a half-hearted effort near the deadline, or finishing a review weeks late, I'm just saying no to peer review on this holiday. In fairness, I won't fret if my own paper takes a little longer than usual on its journey. Instead, I'm going to use this time to reconnect with my son, and relax a spring in my psyche wound so tight that it might snap. When I return to the lab, I will face the next academic year with renewed vigour.

Don't be afraid to join me. ■

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