Publish or Perish, or Pay to Publish

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In recent years we have seen numerous new journals and conferences in a variety of business disciplines. Many of these new journals and conferences have a rigorous review process. However, some journals or conferences do not have any review process at all. Yet, they claim to be double-blind refereed journals on their websites or in their listing of Cabell’s Directory of Publishing Opportunities. I call these journals “pay to publish journals.” An examination of 500 randomly selected management and marketing journals from Cabell’s indicates that 85 journals (17%) charge some kind of fee to publish manuscripts. Fifty of the 85 “pay to publish journals” are located in the U.S., 12 are in India, and five are in the U.K. The decision to classify the journals as paid or non-paid was based on the presence of a statement on the journals’ websites about fees associated with publication. If a journal’s website did not contain such a statement, it was assumed to be non-paid. Of course, there is always a possibility of journals requiring payments via letters of acceptance. Furthermore, the fee to publish is usually hidden somewhere in a website and cannot be found easily. Therefore, the percentage of journals charging money to publish may be higher than what is reported here.

The average fee associated with publication is $300. The fees vary from publication fee, review fee, annual subscription fee, printing per page fee, to mandatory conference fee. While some fees are attempts to cover the cost of publication, most go to journal publishers or conference organizers. Some direct quotes taken from journal or conference websites are as follows: “fee is according to content and author’s ability to pay,” “$520 one author, decreasing additional fees for multiple authors to $850 for four authors,” “$25 per page for accepted articles,” “processing charge $90 after acceptance,” and “processing fee $150 after acceptance.”

Publishing articles of scholars in journals and conference proceedings is a big business. For example, one general business academic organization located in the U.S. organizes three conferences per year and charges about $350 as the conference fee and a $75 annual membership fee. This organization has 17 journals. Papers submitted to one of the conferences are automatically accepted without review for presentation at a conference and for publication in one of the 17 journals. Cabell’s indicates that these 17 journals have 21-30 percent acceptance rates as reported by the editors. The Cabell’s Publishing Directory indicates that the journals in question are refereed! Conference organizers decide in what journal the paper will be published, provided that authors pay the conference fee and the annual membership fee. In most cases, faculty members publishing in these “pay to publish journals” pay the publication fees from their personal funds. In many cases, however, colleges or universities pay for the conference fees and the annual membership fees. Two colleagues had such recent experience. Although the colleagues submitted papers for a conference only, they received acceptance letters for the conference and for a journal. While this was a pleasant surprise to the colleagues at first, they quickly understood that they would be
buying publications and declined the offer. There were no reviewer comments or requests for revision, only requests for the conference fee payment of $350, and annual membership fee payment of $75. Given the large number of journals, it is apparent that this organization is making a substantial amount of money.

Another colleague was asked to serve on an editorial review board of a journal. When she showed interest, the journal editor sent a survey for her to complete. One of the questions in the survey was as follows: “Will you be able to review a paper in 10 days?” The response from my colleague was NO! She was not accepted to the editorial review board despite the fact that she had excellent credentials such as publishing in *Journal of Marketing*. After checking the journal’s website, she learned that the journal charges $500 for an expedited review. Therefore, scholars needing publications to beef up their resumes or to be successful in personnel actions can do so, but this comes at an extra cost.

More and more journals and organizations are entering the publication market because there are no barriers to entry and the high profits are easy to gain. Forming a non-profit organization or just simply obtaining ISBN numbers for journals is all that is needed. Publication costs are low to non-existent as most of the journals are available online. The authors format the articles and the organization leader(s) or a staff member places the articles in a journal format online. The website cost is minimal. In addition, many of these journals do not publish in printed format and some are open access journals.

While most academicians choose more legitimate avenues for publication, a good number choose the “pay to publish” route because of tenure or promotion requirements or other reasons. A number of faculty members secure tenure or promotion using this path. It is even possible that faculty members choosing this path are identified as the most prolific researchers in their institutions because many administrators and faculty members are not aware of the “pay to publish” business. Faculty members may also be awarded the best paper award in conferences sponsored by “pay to publish” industry. For example, one such organization awards a best paper award for each conference session. With an average three or four papers presented in a session, chances of getting an award are good. Chances improve substantially when co-authors attend the same session since the best paper is chosen by vote of all people attending the session, including the presenters.

What Is Wrong?

1. The papers presented at these conferences do not go through a review process. The papers published in the “pay to publish” journals do not go through a review process despite having large editorial review board members listed on their websites.

2. In most cases these “pay to publish” journals are not indexed in directories and databases. Therefore, should an excellent article be published, it is not likely to be shared with other scholars.

3. Academicians publishing in “pay to publish” journals are compared to peers in tenure, promotion, or annual review decisions that affect salary adjustments among other things. Universities that are unaware of “pay to publish” journals cannot maintain equity among their faculty. This can lead to poor morale and declining quality.

4. “Pay to publish” journals make no contribution to the discipline.

5. The use of “pay to publish” journals is unethical. Getting tenure or promotion or a salary increase by publishing in the “pay to publish” journals is akin to students cheating on their exams!

As ethical academicians, we need to end the practice of publishing in “pay to publish” journals. As indicated earlier, two colleagues innocently submitted papers to conferences and received acceptances to the conferences and to “pay to publish” journals. A naïve and inexperienced academician may welcome the opportunity at first, but continued submission to these kinds of conferences or journals must be stopped! We must counsel junior faculty and make them aware that this is an unethical practice.

Needless to say, we must also address the ethical behavior of those individuals who establish and manage such academic organizations. To avoid aiding the continuation of the “pay to publish” journals, we must refuse to pay fees that seem unusual or out of ordinary. If there is any kind of fee, unless the journal is known to have a decent review process, we should submit our papers to no-fee based outlets. Most of these “pay to publish” journals also have websites that look like they are developed inside a garage or inside a van! If these organizations cannot find papers to publish, then the unethical behavior is likely to disappear eventually.

University and college administrators, including department chairs, deans, and provosts must be aware of the organizations and journals publishing for a fee. However, this is not easy to do since faculty members present acceptance letters that say, “refereed journal,” or in most cases “double-blind refereed journal.” The publication fees are usually hidden somewhere in the journal’s website. Most academicians submitting to these journals learn about the publication fees after their papers are accepted for publication.

If you have had experience with the “pay to publish” journals or conferences accepting papers without a review process, please share your experience with me. I would be happy to compile your experiences and publish the results in *Decision Line*. ■