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Dealing with Reviewers' Comments in the Publication Process

Céline Rojon and Mark NK Saunders

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Dealing with Reviewers' Comments in the Publication Process

Céline Rojon and Mark NK Saunders

Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges for authors of dealing with an editor's and reviewers' comments within the manuscript publication process. The paper commences with an overview of the peer review process. The nature and style of comments from editors and reviewers is outlined and the inherent meaning demystified. Using a wide range of anonymised examples, sample comments are categorised according to their ease of being addressed and whether or not the author agrees with them and the need to respond highlighted. Advice is offered regarding the construction of a response document, outlining how editor and reviewer comments have been addressed in the revised manuscript and an example comprising both editor and reviewer comments and author responses provided. The importance of this document in providing a clear audit trail of associated amendments to the manuscript and their justifications in response to the editor's and reviewers' comments is emphasised.

Keywords

peer review; reviewer comments; editor comments; manuscript; article; publishing

Practice points

- This article is relevant to all current and future contributing authors, regardless of their field.
- In order for a manuscript to be sent to review it is crucial that it i) meets the aim and scope of the journal; ii) makes a contribution and iii) is in the prescribed format.
- An editorial decision to revise and resubmit a manuscript should be seen as a positive outcome of the review process.
- When revising their manuscript, authors should respond fully to reviewers' comments and provide, in a separate 'response document', a clear audit trail of the amendments made for the editor/reviewers.

Introduction

The recent article in this journal “Getting published in *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* – our top 10 tips for enhancing your work” (McDowall, 2015) offered both a clear overview of the publishing process, as well as tips for enhancing the researchers’ work. This included advice, albeit brief, regarding how to make effective use of the review process. Emphasising that authors should not be discouraged by reviewers, McDowall (2015) highlighted rather how their comments focus on issues that authors need to address to improve their article. As an editor, her challenge to authors in dealing with such comments is to address them clearly when revising their manuscript and to provide a clear audit trail regarding how exactly they have worked on these. It is this challenge of dealing with the reviewers’ comments that the current article focuses on.

Reviewers’ comments are not given in a vacuum. They relate to a particular manuscript submitted to a specific journal. As a consequence, the respective journal’s editor will be looking to see that the manuscript you submitted meets the aim and scope of their journal and is in the prescribed format. In this article we are assuming that before you submitted your manuscript, you read the journal guidelines and ensured it met fully these requirements. Consequently, in the case of *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, whether your submitted manuscript reports on an original study, is a case study, a literature review or a theoretical piece, it will need to make an explicit link to coaching research and practice. In essence, whatever journal you are submitting to, if it does not meet that journal’s aim and scope, it will not be sent out to review (Kekäle, de Weerd-Nederhof, Cervai, & Borelli, 2009). It is therefore helpful to explain in the letter or email accompanying your original manuscript submission how you believe it meets the journal’s requirements. If you cannot do this, it almost certainly means your manuscript is not suitable for that journal! Your manuscript will also need to conform to the journal’s house style, for example including an abstract, key words, practice points, a list of references in the prescribed format and, crucially, it should also be free of grammatical and spelling errors and not exceed the prescribed word length. If you have done this and the editor agrees the manuscript could be of interest to the journal’s readers, then it will be sent out to review. However, if your manuscript does not meet these pre-requisites, it is likely to be ‘desk rejected’ by the editor (Figure 1). Occasionally, even with a desk reject, the editor may invite you to submit a re-worked manuscript, having addressed the reasons why your manuscript was not appropriate in the first place. This may be simply, for example, because it exceeds the journal’s prescribed word length, or the references are not in the correct format. This invitation will be accompanied by an explanation of what is required and the submission will be treated by the journal as a new manuscript. Consequently, even if you address the reasons for the initial rejection there is no guarantee your manuscript will be sent out for review, let alone receive a ‘revise and resubmit’ or an ‘accept’ decision. In this article, we start with an overview of the review process. We then consider the language used by editors and reviewers in their comments before outlining how to respond to reviewers’ comments. Our article concludes with a summary of the issues raised herein.

An overview of the review process

We will assume that your manuscript has not been desk rejected (Figure 1), but has been sent by the editor to two or three anonymous reviewers. A manuscript being sent out for review can be considered good news, since it means that not only does the

author(s)' paper meet the journal's formal requirements (i.e., is relevant to that journal's scope and has been submitted in the prescribed format), but also that the editor judges the work presented to potentially be worthy of being considered for publication in their journal. The two or three reviewers chosen will be experts in the specific subject area of the manuscript. They will not be told who the author(s) are, but will be invited to provide a written assessment of the manuscript's suitability for publication. Similarly, you will not be told whom the editor has chosen as reviewers of your manuscript. This process is known as 'blind peer review'. Their task as reviewers is to assess your manuscript in relation to the potential contribution it could make and, through their comments, identify what further work ought to be carried out to enable its publication in the respective journal (Caligiuri & Thomas, 2013). In doing so they are likely to offer written comments on the strengths and weaknesses of your manuscript, making sure to not only highlight weak points, but also draw out strong points; and offer specific guidance regarding how to address the perceived problems and improve the manuscript. As highlighted in Figure 1, the reviewers' assessment is based on a wide range of factors related to, amongst others: The focus and defining of key concepts, the article's contribution, the structure and cohesion of the argument(s) made, the literature reviewed, the explanation of method, the analysis and reporting and use of results (Jones & Gatrell, 2014). We have addressed a number of these aspects in earlier articles considering the rationale for a study (Rojon & Saunders 2012), using the literature critically (Saunders & Rojon, 2011) and explaining the research method (Saunders & Rojon, 2014).

Drawing on the comments received by the reviewers, the editor makes a decision as to whether the manuscript should be accepted, rejected or the authors will be asked to revise and resubmit (Figure 1). Whilst a rejection is invariably disheartening, it will be accompanied by the reviewers' comments and an explanation from the editor. In some instances, although the editor has rejected the manuscript on the basis of the reviewers' assessment, she/he may still ask you to resubmit a different version of it: '...although your paper is currently not suitable for publication for the reasons outlined, we would consider a new submission.' This is termed a 'reject and resubmit', and will usually result in your resubmitted manuscript being sent to a new set of reviewers. If you choose to resubmit to the same journal, the feedback you have received will be helpful as you undertake the reworking. Even if you decide to submit your manuscript to another journal in the field, we would strongly advise you to revise it in line with the comments you received from the reviewers – the likelihood of your work being sent out for review to one or more of the scholars who have previously reviewed it, is non-negligible. Reviewers are typically chosen because of their demonstrated expertise in the area addressed by a manuscript and so the pool of potential reviewers for your own manuscript will be comparatively small (Wood & Budhwar, 2015). Consequently, you need to take any reviewers' comments received seriously, regardless of the journal to which you choose to resubmit an initially rejected manuscript.

Whilst very occasionally a manuscript is 'accepted for publication' without further amendments, the most likely decision you will receive is 'revise and resubmit' (Figure 1). This will be accompanied by an outline of the areas the editor wishes you to address, as well as the reviewers' comments. In communicating the decision on your manuscript an editor will usually provide an indication of how likely they consider you will be able to revise the manuscript in such a way that it would be considered suitable for publication. Phrases such as 'the reviewers are in general favourable and suggest that subject to revisions, your paper could be suitable for

publication' or '...subject to minor revisions your paper could be suitable for publication' provide a clear indication that you should be able to revise the manuscript successfully. In contrast phrases such as '...this will involve a considerable amount of work' or '...I would like to point out that this represents a high risk revise and resubmit' indicate more uncertainty in an editor's mind regarding whether you will be able to revise and improve the manuscript sufficiently to warrant publication. Nevertheless, in our view, provided you have been asked to revise and resubmit the manuscript, this should be considered a success; and you should do so addressing the editor's and reviewers' comments as fully as practicable. We discuss this, along with the accompanying 'response document' that provides a clear audit trail explaining how the comments received have been addressed, in more detail in the next section.

On receipt of your revised manuscript and the response document, the editor makes a decision regarding whether it should be accepted, rejected or returned to the reviewers (Figure 1). Acceptance may be accompanied by a request to make a few further relatively minor amendments, this being signified by phrases such as 'I conditionally accept your paper' or 'Please address the reviewers' comments succinctly... I will not send the revised paper to the reviewers.' Where a manuscript is returned to the reviewers, they will consider both your manuscript and response document in making their assessment and providing written comments to the editor. The process continues as outlined in Figure 1, sometimes for up to four cycles! It only ends when the editor, based on reviewers' comments, has reached a decision to either publish or reject your paper; or you, as the author, decide not to resubmit your manuscript to the journal.

Understanding editor's and reviewers' comments

The editor's decision to request you to revise and resubmit your manuscript will be accompanied by an exposition of what you need to do and each of the reviewers' set of comments. Whilst the editor or reviewers may start their comments positively, for example from the editor: 'I enjoyed reading your paper and the reviews are generally favourable...' or from a reviewer: 'This paper makes an original contribution... Congratulations to the author(s)...' these will be followed by what may, on first reading, appear excessively negative comments. You may well feel that such comments are arbitrary, biased and insulting to your ego. This is not unusual because, as highlighted by Driver (2007), the review process is a discourse with elements of subjectivity; and you have put your work up for external scrutiny by others whom, excluding the editor, remain anonymous. Invariably, as the comments have been written to help you improve your manuscript, they will predominantly focus on aspects that need to be improved. However, given the editor has asked you to revise and resubmit the comments need to be read as constructive feedback.

In most instances the editor's guidance will be clear, emphasising those aspects of the reviewers' comments that are considered crucial; for example: '...in your manuscript I recommend you pay careful attention to reviewer one's comment which states...' Where two reviewers provide opposing comments, guidance will usually be offered by the editor as to which reviewer to follow. Where such guidance is not offered and, after careful thought, you remain unclear how to proceed, it is permissible to seek further clarification from the editor politely.

You have probably noticed already that the style in which editors' comments are made seems to suggest you, as an author, can choose to ignore what is being said. Be warned, this is a very risky strategy. For example, if an editor writes: '...it may

help to make your argument more robust if you construct a table which both compares the different types of relationships and summarises the available evidence' is likely to mean '...to make your argument more robust you must include a table, which...'. Similarly the statement: 'you should reconsider your formatting' can be interpreted as 'you need to revise your formatting to ensure that it matches exactly the prescribed for this journal.'

The same advice applies to interpreting reviewers' comments. If a reviewer recommends a particular action, for example: 'You might like to look at work by McDowall and Saunders (2010)...', you need to look at this article and if it is appropriate to your manuscript, include it. Likewise the reviewer comment: 'It would be instructive to include more...' should be interpreted as 'you should include more...'. Comments to aid clarity and enable replicability such as: 'spell out abbreviated names in full the first time they are used' and 'please provide the full source of the scale used to measure...' should invariably be acted upon.

Occasionally you may disagree with one or more comments made by the editor or the reviewers. While you are within your rights to do this, you need to be very certain regarding your reasons for doing so. Both the editor and the reviewer(s) will have spent considerable time reviewing your manuscript and writing their commentary. Consequently, if you disagree with an aspect of the advice they have given, you will need to provide a carefully reasoned and justified argument as to why you have chosen not to address their comment in your response.

Responding to the editor's and reviewers' comments

Unless a manuscript has been rejected, editors usually include an exposition, albeit often limited, of how they wish it to be revised in their communication to the author(s). This is followed by the reviewers' comments, generally presented verbatim. Such editor and reviewers' comments fall into three categories: Those that are easy to address and that you agree with, those that are harder to address and that you agree with, and as we noted earlier, those with which you disagree, whether they may be easy or more difficult to act upon. Each comment must be considered carefully and a response given to both the editor and the reviewers, providing a clear audit trail of the revisions made to the manuscript. In Table 1, we have presented a sample response document, which provides examples of the types of easy or more difficult comments that an author may receive from the editor and the reviewers, alongside sample responses regarding the amendments made. The first two editor comments (Table 1: editor comments 1 and 2) provide examples of a relatively easy and a slightly harder editorial comment. Editor comment 2 also emphasises how, even if you have kept your writing within the prescribed word length, an editor can ask you to both shorten your article and also include additional material!

Comments that are easy to deal with are those that require little further work from the author(s), such as providing further explanations of a concept (Table 1, reviewer 1, comment 4), incorporating additional references (Table 1, reviewer 1, comment 2; reviewer 2, comment 5) or reformatting (parts of) the manuscript (Table 1, editor, comment 1). Addressing easy comments also provides you, as the author, with a good opportunity to demonstrate to the editor and the reviewers that you have taken their ideas and concerns into account, even if you may not always entirely agree with their suggestions. Indicating precisely how you have thought about and implemented advice provided will stand you in good stead with your reviewers and the journal's editor. Comments that are more difficult to address may pertain, amongst others, to gathering further data (Table 1, reviewer 2, comment 1),

restructuring the manuscript (Table 2, reviewer 2, comment 3), providing further justification to address a point of contention between yourself and the reviewer(s) (Table 1, reviewer 1, comment 3) or articulating the contributions made by your article more clearly (Table 1, reviewer 2, comment 4). For all such comments, it is vital that you reflect on how you could take the issues raised by the editor/the reviewers into account and that you explain in your response document how exactly you have done this – and where in the manuscript. This will enable the manuscript's reviewers and the editor to determine if, upon consideration of the changes you made in response to their suggestions, your manuscript is now suitable for publication in the journal, requires further revisions, or will be rejected (Figure 1).

As you will have already noticed when referring to our sample response document (Table 1), not all comments made by the reviewers/the editor, regardless of whether they are easy or hard to deal with, will meet with your agreement as an author. In general, we would not recommend disagreeing with an editor even if s/he has rejected your manuscript. Her or his comments are derived from years of experience and, even if the decision is a 'reject', can still help you improve your work. Nevertheless, if, after thinking through the suggestions made by a reviewer carefully and perhaps consulting with colleagues as to how reasonable the points raised are, you still disagree that taking them into account would improve your manuscript, it is permissible to state this in your response document. As noted earlier, in doing this you need to be very clear in your response why you have chosen not to address the comment(s) made. It is not sufficient to say that you disagree. Rather, we recommend that you thank the reviewer for their suggestions and provide a polite, reasoned explanation for why you do not concur with their point of view. In many instances, you may feel it appropriate to offer a compromise by acknowledging the value of the suggestion for future research on your topic of interest (Table 1, reviewer 1, comment 3).

Conclusion

Within this article we have offered our perspective on addressing comments received by anonymous reviewers and the editor following submission of an article to a journal, such as *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. We emphasised that an article being sent out for review in the first place (rather than being 'desk rejected'), as well as receiving a 'revise and resubmit' (rather than a straight 'reject') should both be considered positive signs: Your manuscript has clear potential to offer useful insights to fellow researchers and practitioners. That being said, improving upon our work is an inherent part of the scientific process, even if this may require all of us as authors to invest substantial time and effort into re-working our manuscripts. Within this, some suggestions received by reviewers/an editor may be easy and quick to address, whilst others may necessitate a great deal of further work. Still other comments may not correspond our own ideas as authors. However, in our current article we have highlighted that it is crucial to consider carefully all comments provided on a manuscript and provide an audit trail in the form of a clear, reasoned response document outlining how each of the editor's and reviewers' comments have been addressed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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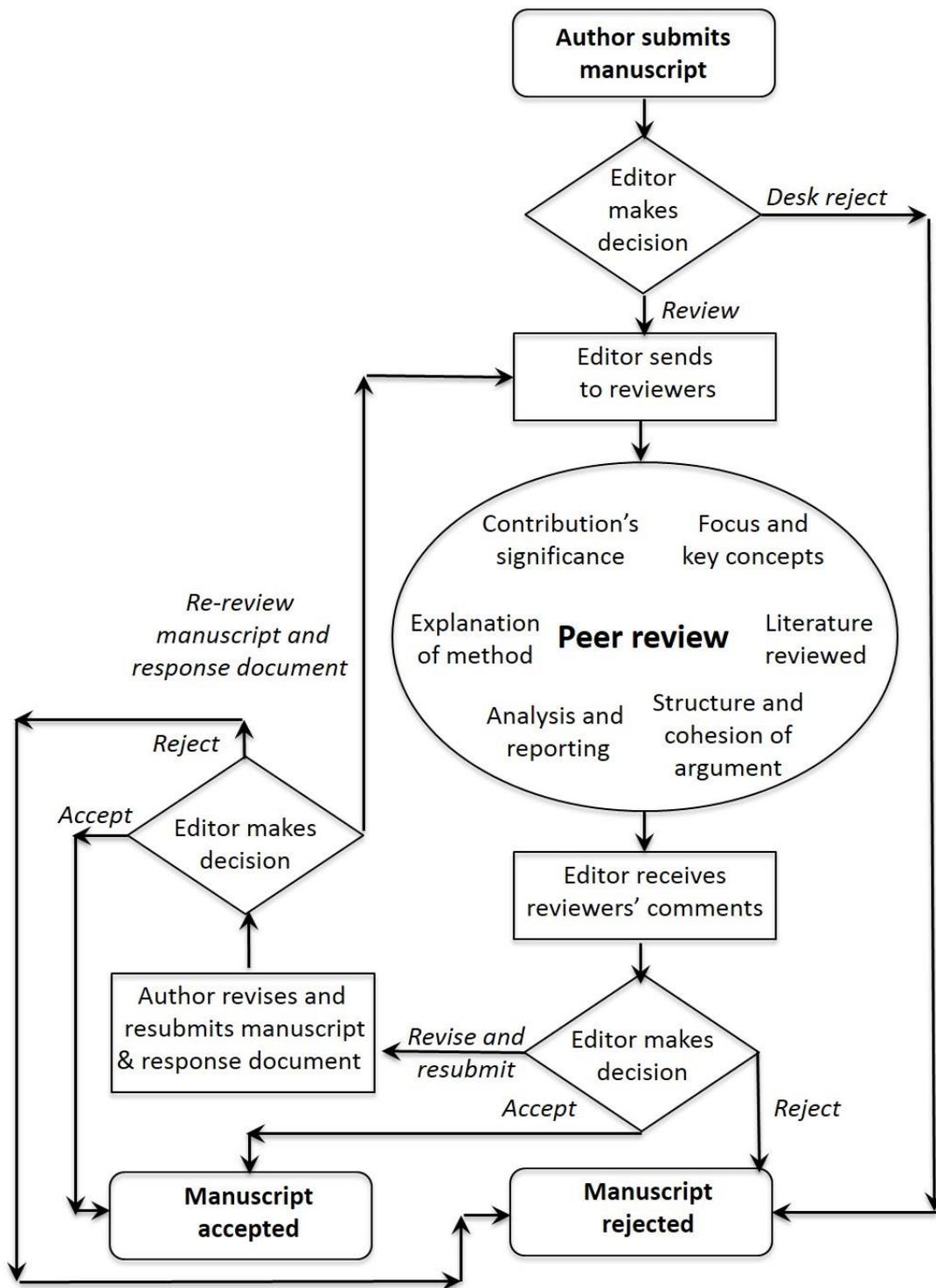


Figure 1: The peer review process.

Table 1: Sample response document.

Level of difficulty	Editor/reviewer comment	Author response	Page in manuscript
Easy	Editor, comment 1: Focus on revising the introduction to incorporate the explicit aim and to provide an expanded ‘key message’.	We have fully revised the introduction to incorporate the main aim of our article. This now states: “The aim of this research is to...[full aim inserted from manuscript]”. We have also incorporated the key message of the research from our findings stating: “Our findings emphasise how...[key message inserted from manuscript]”	2
(Slightly) Harder	Editor, comment 2: Your article is too long in its current form. It could be considerably shortened by providing a clearer focus and explaining how exactly consideration of the construct of [xyz], which you have examined here, adds to the coaching process.	Acknowledging that our manuscript was somewhat lengthy, we have channelled our efforts into rephrasing our ideas more concisely and we hope to have addressed your comment further by explaining more clearly the value that [xyz] brings to the coaching process.	6 and throughout the paper
Easy	Reviewer 1, comment 1: I think this is a good article focussing on a highly relevant topic. However, I have an issue with the poor quality of English that is apparent throughout, leading me to recommend that you have the article reviewed by a native English speaker prior to resubmission.	Thank you for your supportive comments. We have taken your feedback on board and have asked a native English speaker to read the manuscript and ensure it is free of any language or stylistic issues.	Throughout the paper
Easy	Reviewer 1, comment 2: I would argue that the literature on [xyz] is relevant to the focus of your article and therefore recommend that you consider incorporating key references.	We agree with you that [xyz] relates to the topic of our manuscript and we had indeed previously considered including literature speaking to this. At the time of preparing our paper, however, we were unsure as to how well it would fit in. Given your suggestion, we have now had a closer look at relevant key references, which we have incorporated where we thought it made most sense.	1-3 (literature review)
Harder	Reviewer 1, comment 3: In my view, the idea towards the bottom of page 16 that [xyz] is a core part of the construct you have examined seems rather far-fetched and is not substantiated. I think most other scholars in the area would agree with	It is interesting to hear your view on this matter and we would like to thank you for bringing up this particular issue. Our view is that a different position may also be arguable: The findings from our study clearly point to [xyz] being a key component of the construct we have examined. Therefore, whilst other researchers	16-17 (discussion)

Level of difficulty	Editor/reviewer comment	Author response	Page in manuscript
	me that this is not a worthwhile or realistic representation of the construct of [xyz].	investigating the construct, as well as yourself, may not regard [xyz] as important in the context of this construct, we believe that this aspect in particular adds weight to the overall argument of our paper in that it challenges existing views and opens the door for further exploration. Nevertheless, acknowledging that our findings may be controversial, we have added a small paragraph explaining that they are exploratory and that further research into this matter is required.	
Easy	Reviewer 1, comment 4: It was unclear to me what you mean by [xyz]; please could you provide a brief definition?	We acknowledge that not introducing [xyz] clearly by providing a definition was an oversight from our part; we have now rectified this as suggested.	4
Harder	Reviewer 2, comment 1: The title and topic of this article are attention-grabbing and it is evident that the authors have spent a great deal of time and energy on the conceptualising, researching and writing of and for this manuscript. However, whilst I support the use of qualitative data in psychological research, I believe the overall contribution of your research could be greatly strengthened by including some further quantitative data. To this extent, I would recommend you conduct another study examining your topic from a quantitative angle.	We very much appreciate your supportive comments. We also thank you for your useful suggestion to collect further, quantitative data, to substantiate our manuscript. However, after careful consideration of your suggestion, we believe that the focus of the current paper is exploratory and, as such, our emphasis on presenting qualitative data only, seems reasonable. Nevertheless, we agree with you that gathering quantitative data to corroborate our qualitative findings would be a very worthwhile undertaking and one that may follow on from our current research. Indeed, we believe that findings from a quantitative study on our topic of interest could usefully be published in a subsequent, separate article. To this extent, we have included your suggestion in our section on 'Limitations and Future Research'.	18 (discussion)
Easy	Reviewer 2, comment 2: The model on [xyz] that you showed in Figure 1 is interesting and, in my view, lends itself to being used as a discussion piece in teaching.	Thank you for acknowledging the value of the model, which we developed as a result of exploring the concept of [xyz] with our sample. It has been used already for the purposes indicated and proved to be helpful in aiding understanding of the issues raised.	Figure 1
Harder	Reviewer 2, comment 3: I am a bit unclear as to what type of article you are aiming to present here? It comes across as a contribution which	Upon further reviewing of our manuscript, we come to the conclusion that you raise a valid point. Therefore, we have attempted to rephrase and restructure the current version of our paper in such a way that it reads more	Throughout the paper

Level of difficulty	Editor/reviewer comment	Author response	Page in manuscript
	might sit well as a chapter in a, but, to be considered for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, it requires more rigour.	like a peer-reviewed journal article than a book chapter; we hope that our attempts of introducing more rigour meet with your expectations.	
Harder	Reviewer 2, comment 4: We encourage the authors to consider the managerial implications of the study results much more and to provide sufficient substantiation for any claims made in this regard.	Whilst we have found it rather challenging to develop managerial implications following on from the results of our research, given its mostly theoretical nature, we have done our best to follow up on your suggestion. In response to your comment, we have therefore included ideas for three possible practical applications of our research.	17-18 (discussion)
Easy	Reviewer 2, comment 5: Though I am aware that there is only limited research on the related topic of [xyz], we would encourage you to consider including the studies by McDowall & Saunders (2010) and Saunders & Rojon (2014).	Thank you for bringing these two interesting articles, which we had not come across before, to our attention. After careful consideration of how much value the two recommended articles would add to the overall argument of our paper, and concluding that they only marginally touch on the issues raised herein, we have chosen not to include them in our the revised version of our manuscript. We thank you for your understanding of our decision, which has been well thought through.	n/a