



How papers can find and retain copy editors ACES survey quantifies industry shortage

By HANK GLAMANN

"On Copy Editing"

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"Without support from upper management and encouragement from the rest of the newsroom, few journalists will find copy editing to be attractive."

That response to the question "How can the industry do a better job of building a better pool of copy editors?" is one of many gathered in a survey conducted to determine the extent of and the reasons for the shortage of copy editors at newspapers.

The American Copy Editors Society wondered what papers were doing to address this problem, whether editors felt that the academic community should do more to feed the pipeline, and what the industry was doing to encourage people to enter the field.

The study was administered by copy editor Carrie Camillo of the Star Tribune in Minneapolis. With the support of her paper and its editor, Tim McGuire, she produced a 33-page report that is the most comprehensive work available on the subject. This column is taken from Camillo's report.

ACES queried 242 newspapers, and 115 people responded. Fewer than a third (36) said that their copy desks were fully staffed, while 79 had openings, most of which (57) resulted from resignations. Other reasons included promotion of a staff member (30), increased need for staff because of pagination or other technology (21), addition to staff because of new editions or projects (20) and recovery from tighter budgets or downsizing (6).

To fill positions, most of those with openings were using ads in trade publications, in their papers or in other publications (59) and contacts with editors at other papers (56). Also listed: Job fairs (40), college visits (29) and the Internet (22).

Only three of the 115 respondents had not hired copy editors in the preceding year. Most said they hired from other papers (97), while others turned to colleges (46) or found people within

their own newsrooms (38). A majority of respondents (60) said their papers had experimented with unconventional hiring, with 34 turning to reporters, 25 to schoolteachers and four to technical writers.

Internship participation was high, with 86 respondents reporting involvement. Efforts to promote diversity in hiring were even more prevalent, with 96 respondents listing that as a priority. When asked whether college journalism programs are encouraging students to become copy editors, nine said yes and 55 said no.

Respondents offered many suggestions for how the industry can build a better pool of copy editors, mainly by raising pay, providing more support, increasing the importance of the job and offering more and better training.

Among their comments:

“Support copy editors more. Too often the highest accolade is silence.”

“Specialized training, better pay and diversity in scheduling to allow for day work. The night hours are hard for many people.”

“More status, better pay. Make it attractive to the sharpest people.”

“Learn what copy editors do. Respect the workers and value the work. Strive to make copy editors an integral part of the news-gathering operation.”

“Higher pay and greater recognition that pagination means more work for copy desks.”

“More seminars that focus on fundamentals: headline writing, basic editing.”

“Encourage journalism schools to value editing, not just writing. Let editors know they are important and needed.”

“Build pride and professionalism in the unique job of copy editing. Quit trying to have copy editors do layout ‘on the side.’ Aim training and professional development programs specifically at copy editors.”

“Fuller participation in internship programs, both external and internal. Even the most promising college graduates need extensive training in copy editing.”

“Better partnerships with schools so that we reinforce the importance of copy editing.”

“We need to include copy editors in story and content development and in strategic planning sessions. Most papers have done a poor job in this regard. We also have to devote more resources to staff development.”

“Recruiting is the answer. You have to sell your newspaper to copy editors who have their pick of jobs. You have to do this all the time, not just when you have a vacancy.”

“Divide the ever-increasing copy desk duties to allow employees to focus on what they do best – design, headline writing, editing, picture editing, etc. Then, properly train, empower and motivate them to do those specialized tasks they enjoy.”

“Editors should earn substantially more than reporters. Offer variety in the position through cross-training. Figure out a way to make the hours more palatable through flex time and four-day weeks.”

“Exterminate the widespread notion that copy editors are second-class journalists.”

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