

„This breadth is utterly fascinating.“

Christian Kuttner, who holds a doctorate in natural sciences, has been working as an editor at *Nature Communications* for three years.

By Maike Pfalz

Christian Kuttner appeared to be on a straightforward path toward a career in science: after completing his diploma and doctorate, he undertook multiple post-doctoral positions, eventually earning a prestigious role as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow in Spain. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he made the decision to pivot to a position at Springer Nature.¹⁾

What prompted your transition to publishing?

I had a rather narrow focus and was determined to lead my own research group, secure independent funding, and build the lab. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, and I found myself stranded as a principal investigator in Spain. But after the birth of my daughter, I wanted more time for my family in Germany. This led me to aspire a professorship at a Germany university.

Were you successful?

Yes! I received an offer for a professorship, but the overall package did not align. By chance, at the same time I came across a job advertisement from *Nature Communications*.

How so?

I have always enjoyed reading and reviewing papers—even those outside my specific research field. The role of an editor presented the perfect opportunity to explore a broader spectrum of topics while still contributing to science.

What was the application process like?

Initially, I had to evaluate three manuscripts from home and document my decisions. This was followed by a four-hour interview with the Chief Editor, during which I was asked to spontaneously evaluate two more manuscripts. Since I enjoy discussing science, I found this quite easy.

Was it difficult to turn away from a career as an active researcher?

Initially, it was challenging to let go of my own research. However, I quickly realized that publishing more papers (as an author) wasn't going to make me any happier. Editorial work offers me more flexibility, freedom, and opportunities for growth than a traditional academic career. It also allows me to broaden my intellectual horizons.

What do you mean by that?

In academia, you are highly specialized in a narrow field. As an editor, however, I am responsible for physical che-

¹⁾ The views and opinions expressed herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect those of *Nature Communications*, *Nature Portfolio* or *Springer Nature*.



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At many events, Christian Kuttner presents his work in the field of scientific publishing.

mistry and nanomaterials—a vast area encompassing single molecules, carbon nanotubes, plasmonic nanoparticles, and 2D materials. This breadth is utterly fascinating.

Was the transition difficult?

It depends on how you look at it. Suddenly, there were manuscripts on my desk dealing with topics I had little prior knowledge of. The only solution was extensive reading. Even now, I read every manuscript from start to finish. It's an ongoing learning process. Each new manuscript adds another piece to the larger scientific puzzle, and after three years, I now have a solid overview.

Was there structured training for the role?

Nature journals have established processes and training methods to guide us in making decisions about manuscripts. This begins with unconscious bias training, helping us evaluate papers impartially. Next, we assess whether a manuscript presents genuine advance in a field.

What is critical in this evaluation process?

Our success hinges on making transparent decisions and selecting the right reviewers—those with proven technical expertise but without conflicts of interest. We have access to an extensive database to assist with this.

How do you feel about working for one of the world's largest scientific publishers?

Sometimes, working for such a massive corporation—with over 9,400 employees—can be challenging, as many decisions are made at higher levels, beyond one's influence. However, the global nature of the publisher gives me the freedom to choose my workplace. Apart from

Berlin, I could work in Shanghai, New York, London, Heidelberg, Munich or many other places in the world.

Where is your team based?

Nature Communications employs over 150 editors worldwide, so all meetings are hybrid. The publishing landscape is growing rapidly—five years ago, we had half as many editors, and the trend is still upward.

What does a typical workday look like?

Every day, I receive about two new manuscripts to read and research. A significant portion of my work involves reading and understanding response letters from authors. Communication—with both authors and colleagues—is central to the role. Manuscripts often circulate among the editorial team because the topics are so multidisciplinary.

Does your job involve travel?

I attend many conferences, seminars, and lab visits. I also participate in poster sessions and seek to engage with as many people in the scientific community as possible to stay updated on current research.

That sounds very diverse.

It absolutely is. The job is highly dynamic, and I can organize my work to suit my preferences. Some editors rarely attend conferences, but I enjoy them. Despite this, I still have plenty of time for my family, although I occasionally work evenings or weekends.

How do you handle communication with authors?

Primarily via email. It's important to express oneself clearly to avoid misunderstandings. Emails are better than video calls because they provide a written record of everything discussed. Communication is crucial in this job. For instance, in decision letters, it's essential to be clear about for which reasons a manuscript cannot be published—honest yet firm enough to prevent unnecessary rebuttals and appeals that prolong the process.

It sounds like a delicate balancing act.

It certainly is. Only a small fraction of manuscripts can be published. In my subject area, most submissions are rejected outright, while the rest are sent for peer review. Of these, less than half are eventually published.

That's quite selective.

Yes, and we're sometimes criticized for it. Our goal is to publish significant advances with broad appeal or major relevance for very specialized fields.

What skills are essential for the job?

Openness to various topics, a passion for reading scientific literature, high frustration tolerance, critical thinking, and the ability to quickly process information. I can't afford to spend several hours reading a single paper, and some response letters are 50 to 100 pages long, so I often skim through them.

What's the appeal of this role?

Being at the forefront of science, helping researchers to develop and present their work in the best possible way

and providing a platform for talented researchers to succeed, thereby positively influencing careers.

What are the opportunities for advancement?

The prospects are good if you show passion for the job and take on responsibility—not just for subject areas but, in some roles, for personnel. However, positions such as Editor-in-Chief or Editorial Director are limited.

Are there other career pathways?

Some editors return to academia, move to companies, or work at organizations like the European Patent Office.

Do you have any specific plans?

There are occasionally open positions at our flagship journal *Nature* magazine, or opportunities as Editor-in-Chief in our *Nature Research* and *Communications* journals.

Thanks to a "Science-meets-Politics" fellowship from the Wilhelm and Else Heraeus

Foundation, I'm currently on a secondment at the German Bundestag for a few months.

To what end?

I am working with Prof. Stephan Seiter, member of the Bundestag, and his team, gaining fascinating insights into policy-making in the areas of education, research, and technology assessment. This gives me the opportunity to take a look into the engine room of the Bundestag and experience the democratic processes at first hand. I'm also involved in key topics like revising the Fixed-Term Academic Contracts Act (WissZeitVG) and the conceptualization of the upcoming Research Data Act (Forschungsdatengesetz).



Christian Kuttner – brief CV

2005 – 2009 Studied chemistry at Univ. Bayreuth
2010 – 2014 Doctorate at the Univ. Bayreuth
2014 – 2015 Postdoc Univ. Bayreuth – Bayreuth Center for Colloids and Interfaces
2015 – 2017 Postdoc Leibniz Institute of Polymer Research (IPF), Dresden
2018 – 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, CIC biomaGUNE, Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain
2021 Participated in „Leading for Tomorrow“, the leadership program of the DPG
2021 – 2023 Associate Editor at Nat. Commun., Springer Nature, Berlin
since 08/2023 Senior Editor at Nat. Commun., Springer Nature, Berlin
since 10/2024 Bundestag-Fellow „Science meets Politics“

