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The Indexing Work Environment

The love of learning, the sequestered nooks,
And all the sweet serenity of books.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

INDEXING IS A CRUCIAL and widespread activity, but it is inconspicuous. Documents need indexes to help people find specific information within them, and collections need indexes to help people locate specific items they contain. Although most people use indexes regularly, hardly anyone thinks of the creative activity that went into their making. Despite inroads being made by computers, most indexes are still created by humans.

An index is a systematic guide that helps people find information in a document, such as a book, or documents in a collection, such as records in an archive. In addition to the terms that represent the topics of the document or collection item, an index also needs a syntax that allows expression of complex topics, such as a heading with subheadings; cross-references to lead from terms to other potentially useful terms; locators, such as page numbers, or links to lead users to information about the terms they select; and a way of filing the headings or making them searchable.

A glossary is not an index, because it does not link from its entries to other content. A concordance – an alphabetised list of words in a document – is not a true index because it simply lists words and phrases from the text, without analysis. Much the same is true of search engine ‘indexes’, which rely on the actual words in a document. A table of contents is not an index because it mimics the sequence of the material in the book, rather than providing an alternative view.

This chapter introduces the industry and the people who provide the context for the indexing process. Indexers need to know how to work with editors and authors, how to manage a business effectively, and how to create quality indexes

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quickly. Authors contribute the text – the clearer the writing and argument, the easier the job of indexing. Book authors usually have to provide indexes to their works, either by creating them or paying indexers to do so. Authors of periodical articles and intranet content may provide keywords for their writings (although these are often edited), while authors of articles in bibliographical databases have no role at all in indexing.

Book editors plan the indexing requirements; write briefs for indexers and occasionally index works themselves. Most other indexing projects have someone with the role of editor or project manager who coordinates the indexing and ensures the quality of the final product, especially when more than one person has contributed to the indexing.

All steps in the indexing process should take into account the needs of the end user. In some cases the typical user can be identified, but in others the indexing has to be appropriate for a wide range of users.

Indexers

My biggest success to date has been convincing my mother-in-law that indexing is really, really cool. Seth Maislin, 2004

It is said that people study library science because they love books, but soon discover that they mainly deal with the covers of books. Indexers are more fortunate, in that we usually have to read the texts we are indexing. Indexers create indexes – A to Z lists of important topics – for virtually every type of document that exists. These indexes are a crucial key to detailed information.

Indexing is a very small profession. Most indexers train as librarians or editors, others as records managers or technical writers. A few learn the job from family and friends. It sounds like a paradox, but specialist indexers today are usually generalists. That is, they bring their indexing skills to bear on a wide variety of materials and subjects.

Book indexers tend to be employed by publishers or authors on a freelance basis rather than full time, although a few regular clients can keep an indexer in full-time work. Periodical indexers also tend to be freelancers, and may work throughout the year developing indexes that are published at the end of the year. Many collection indexing jobs are full time, although indexing may be only part of the person's job. Some indexers work with a wide range of formats, especially if they have learnt a variety of indexing types, but others specialise in either books or collections, and have only a vague idea of the requirements of the other types of indexing.

An indexer needs good general knowledge, the ability to grasp new concepts quickly, curiosity, attention to detail, interest in linguistic issues, and the ability to see things from somebody else's point of view. Although indexing jobs rarely have mandatory qualifications, most indexers have one or two degrees and at least forty years' life experience. Age is no bar to freelance indexing, but Kingsley Siebel once

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wrote to one of the authors (9 August 1996) that he was progressing well in a job application until he wrote his date of birth – 1917. No-one had known he was a near octogenarian, and this put them off.

Many writers have discussed the traits that make a good indexer, and a remarkable number find it a suitable task for prisoners. For example, ‘a public-spirited contributor to *The Nation*’ in 1883 suggested:

Let all convicts who can read and write be set, under competent supervision, to indexing books . . . the kind of labor proposed is peculiarly suited to the reformatory idea, being incomparable for teaching order, patience, humility, and for thoroughly eradicating the last trace of the Old Adam in whoever pursues it.
 [Collins 2001]

Learning to index

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.

Geoffrey Chaucer

The best ways to learn to index are:

- do a course run by one of the indexing societies or an online or video course (up-to-date details are available on society websites, including www.aussi.org)
- study indexing within another course; some editing and librarianship courses include a component on indexing
- learn on the job, in a library or a company
- take part in a mentoring program such as the one run by ANZSI (McMaster 2005)
- learn from an indexer who takes on ‘apprentices’ or offers training for payment
- read the resources: standard indexing textbooks, the international journal *The indexer*, content on the indexing society websites, websites of practising indexers, and the Index Students website (indexstudents.com)
- do practice indexes of well-indexed books (see the review excerpts in *The indexer*) and compare your results with theirs
- subscribe to mailing lists (see below)
- go to meetings of your local indexing society.

The April 2002 and October 2005 issues of *The indexer* feature articles on education for indexing and getting started in indexing. Dawney Spencer (1998–2004) has written many articles for beginning indexers.

Peer review by fellow indexers is a good form of feedback, especially for beginners. The Index Peer Reviewers discussion group (finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/IndexPeers) and colleagues in indexing societies may help, and some people pay for individual guidance. Some local indexing groups run peer review sessions in which you can get practical hints from other indexers. Martha Osgood (2004) writes that peer review can act both as a learning tool, through discussions of the application of indexing guidelines for different books, and as an editing

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tool, to bring an index up to professional standard prior to submitting to the publisher.

Societies of indexers

To learn something about everything and everything about something.

Thomas Henry Huxley

Many indexers work as freelancers. Some book indexers work in-house for large companies, especially legal publishers, or index as part of editing or technical writing jobs. Some database indexers work as librarians or for specialist companies, while others work from home on a contract basis. Most collection indexers work in museums, libraries, records offices and specialist companies.

Because indexing is such a small profession, networking with colleagues is an essential part of being a professional. There are now societies of indexers in eight countries or regions:

- Australia: Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers, ANZSI, previously AusSI – www.aussi.org, soon to be www.anzsi.org
- Canada: Indexing Society of Canada/Société canadienne d'indexation, ISC/SCI – www.indexers.ca
- China: China Society of Indexers, CSI – www.cnindex.fudan.edu.cn (in Chinese)
- Germany: Deutsches Netzwerk der Indexer, DNI – www.d-indexer.org/welcome.html
- The Netherlands: Nederlands Indexers Netwerk, NIN – www.indexers.nl
- Southern Africa: Association of Southern African Indexers and Bibliographers, ASAIB – www.asaib.org.za
- United Kingdom and Ireland: Society of Indexers, SI – www.indexers.org.uk
- United States: American Society of Indexers, ASI – www.asindexing.org

There was a society in Japan about ten years ago, but it no longer exists.

Most of the societies provide:

- communication between members, including meetings, newsletters, websites, e-mailed announcements and blogs
- advice to potential indexers and to clients
- training in indexing and related topics
- promotion of indexing; for instance DNI runs a stall and indexers' meeting at the Frankfurt Book Fair
- promotion of indexers' services through a database or register of indexers.

Experienced indexers also get a lot of their work through word of mouth, much of it through colleagues from their society.

John Simkin (2005) has summarised the history of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI, now ANZSI with the inclusion of New Zealand) and Hazel Bell (1997–2000) has written on the history of all of the indexing societies.

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Indexers also join local societies of information scientists, secondary publishers, editors, technical writers, information architects, knowledge managers, and so on, depending on their specific interests.

Working for employers

Although freelance indexing is emphasised in indexing discussion groups, a number of book indexers work full-time for employers, often legal publishers. Editors of specialised publications such as cookbooks and technical writers of manuals and online help may also work in-house and spend some or all of their time indexing.

Database indexers may work for national, State and specialist libraries that have a responsibility for managing a bibliographic database. These jobs appear to have been falling in number in recent years. Intranet and website teams may hire indexers or information architects as full-time staff or consultants.

A few indexing companies, run by individuals, employ indexers for book and database indexing. They provide a collegial work environment and help to even out the individual's flow of work.

Full-time indexing jobs are advertised only occasionally, so they are easy to miss. Positions may be filled through internal promotion, word of mouth, or through employment agencies specialising in library and information work or technical writing.

Indexers who work on large projects for employers are likely to be in a team. Teams can consist of one indexer working with a variety of other staff, or a number of indexers working on similar aspects of the one project. Teamwork may involve various kinds of collaboration:

- with other professionals: for instance, information architects and programmers on an intranet search engine
- with non-professionals who are working as indexers: for instance, authors of intranet content who are expected to provide subject metadata for their contributions
- with other indexers on an open-ended project: for instance, as one of a number of indexers for a bibliographic journal database
- with other indexers on a large job: for instance, as one of a number of indexers for a multivolume encyclopedia.

Enid Zafran (in Perlman 2001: 67–70) has written about employing indexers as staff or subcontractors. See also *Consistency* in Chapter 8 and *Encyclopedias and other multivolume works* in Chapter 9.

Freelance indexing

To business that we love we rise betime
 And go to't with delight.

William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

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Freelance indexing suits people who like choice and variety and can live with some uncertainty. It usually entails working from home, and provides independence, freedom from office politics, and the chance to set your own working hours. It requires self-discipline to get the work done – particularly the less-favoured parts of the work – and it can be difficult to balance personal and work life. Freelance indexers often work one or two days a week in another job to ensure some security of income and human contact. In China a freelancer is called ‘a person without a workgroup’.

When Caroline Colton (1996) spoke to the NSW Society of Editors about indexing, the society light-heartedly offered a prize to the person who could identify Caroline’s star sign. Most picked her as a Virgo or Taurus, but Caroline replied:

I am an Aries – reckless. This is an essential characteristic of an indexer. Anyone who tries to make a living out of full-time indexing would have to be reckless, because it is a very small industry. It’s a bit like being a platypus; you can end up in a shrinking habitat. You have to be constantly conscious of marketing, of bringing work in, of having regular paying customers, of having a mixture of formats from books to journals to electronic publishing.

Small business management

Talk of nothing but business, and dispatch that business quickly.

Aldus Manutius (1449–1515)

To work effectively as a freelance indexer you have to develop small business skills as well as professional skills. You could do a small business course, read up on the topic, or consult an accountant. You will need to:

- build up a client base, and maintain a steady flow of interesting work
- quote realistically
- maintain adequate cash flow by pursuing prompt payment
- save for retirement
- manage your own computer maintenance and equipment
- maintain a safe workplace
- provide for training and professional development
- manage your time well, including slipped schedules and overlapping jobs (and know when to take time off)
- communicate with clients on the phone and online
- keep mandatory and useful records.

The Business Entry Point website (www.business.gov.au) provides excellent introductory material on starting a business, home-based businesses and occupational health and safety. Janet Perlman (2001) provides a wealth of advice on running an indexing business.

Records of the work you do are important for professional, business and legal reasons. Indexers have to record client details, including company style guides and

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special requirements. If you store templates in your indexing software according to each client's stylistic and output requirements, you will be able to deal with these automatically. If you keep records of the jobs you have done, the person you dealt with, the amount you were paid and the time taken, you will find it easier to select the clients that pay best and to quote more effectively in future.

Keep electronic copies of all the indexes you do in case you are asked to index later editions or similar works. When you deliver work ask the client to acknowledge receipt so you have a permanent record that the job was received. It may also be useful to ask for feedback on the job.

Keep financial records of invoices and payments so you can chase up late payment and fulfil your tax obligations. Business records have to be kept for seven years in Australia. A contact management program and dedicated billing application such as QuickBooks or MYOB may be useful. See also *Legal matters*, below.

Managing freelance work

Drive thy business or it will drive thee.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Experienced indexers get most of their work from repeat clients, referrals from other indexers, and contacts through their listings on society websites. Many also do regular marketing to keep up a supply of new clients, who can fill gaps when clients disappear and provide an opportunity to say no to low-paying clients. Well-established indexers also start marketing again if they want to broaden their work to include other types of indexing, for instance, moving from book indexing to database or website indexing.

Experience is the most important factor in getting a job. You can build up work samples by doing voluntary projects such as newsletters, procedure manuals, minutes, books without indexes, genealogical materials, and websites. Some people work for another indexer as a subcontractor or mentee (see above) to get experience while building up a client base. To increase the chances of finding work, network with indexers, editors, writers, information architects and other people involved in the fields you would like to index in. It may take three years to build up enough regular clients to fill your schedule.

Marketing approaches should focus on any technical or subject skills you have. They can include:

- mailouts to publishers of a simple brochure about you and your indexing service, with details or samples of indexes you have created
- cold calls to editorial departments; first find out as much as you can about the person you should ask for, and the interests of the company
- combinations of mailouts and phone calls ('I'm phoning to see if you received my mailout') so your name is seen or heard several times within a short period
- a website with details of your training and experience, which may list the books and other works you have indexed, and link to sample indexes on the web (e.g., at Amazon.com) when they are available

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- including your name in your indexing society's list of Indexers Available, and other directories as appropriate
- advertising in newsletters for authors and publishers, such as the Australian publication *Thorpe weekly newsletter* (the 'blue newsletter', www.thorpe.com.au/products/products_wbn.htm).

Authors occasionally write to indexing mailing lists seeking quotes for a job. As many people usually respond it is often not worth the effort to quote. Project managers tendering for a job may ask an indexer to quote for the indexing part of it. If they fail to get the job, the indexer misses out. Janet Perlman (2001: 57–65) describes the writing of proposals for large indexing jobs.

One of the hardest things about freelance indexing is estimating the fee to charge for a job. Indexing societies and colleagues can help by providing guidelines, but only experience can tell you how long a certain job is likely to take you. Given the economics of the publishing industry, there is often not enough money to pay the fee the indexer requests – in these cases a cheaper job can sometimes be negotiated. This can include leaving out certain items (e.g., names of cited authors) or doing a less detailed index overall.

A rule of thumb is that an in-house employee costs the company their salary plus 40%. So if you would expect to earn \$40 per hour in an in-house job, you should be earning \$56 per hour as a freelancer, as well as charging for expenses. You then have to add 10% Goods and Services Tax in Australia (and similar in some other countries).

The ANZSI recommended rate is \$55 per hour. Technical indexing rates are often higher. Legal decisions in New South Wales aiming to reverse legally entrenched pay inequity based on the perceived breadwinner status of males have improved the pay of librarians, and may trickle on to indexers (Bonella 2003).

Per-job quotes are common in Australia. Nonetheless, it is handy to have a per-page rate as a rule of thumb – ours is the rather broad \$2 to \$12 per page, with most jobs costing between \$3 and \$8 per page. In the United Kingdom many indexers charge per hour. The Society of Indexers (UK) recommends a rate of at least £17.50 per hour, which works out at approximately £2.00 per page for a straightforward index. They are planning to replace this with a more detailed grid approach. If you charge by the hour you might be asked to quote an upper limit as well as an hourly rate.

The American Society of Indexers does not recommend a standard rate, but most indexers and publishers work with per-page rates, the average being about US\$4.00. The ASI salary survey 2004 shows trends in indexing rates (www.asindexing.org/site/SalarySurvey.shtml).

When a per-page rate is automatically applied to all jobs, it does not take into account the complexity of the work or the number of words per page. The size of pages, the type size, the format (e.g., two-column), and the number of illustrations all affect the number of words. To better estimate the scope of jobs, some indexers

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count the number of words instead of pages. A rough guide is to charge one to two cents per word of text, so a 100,000-word book would cost \$1000 to \$2000 to index.

Other indexers quote per index entry or locator. To do this effectively it helps to have an idea of the number of locators to be included in the final index. Indexing policies can affect the cost – some people would index 25, 26, 27 as three locators, whereas others would compress it to 25–27 and earn one-third as much. It is also important to clearly define ‘index entry’: some people regard each page number as one entry, but to others everything connected to one main heading is an entry (see *Definitions* in Chapter 2). Charges per locator range from 50c to \$2.00, depending on the complexity of the text.

An indexer’s quote is usually for the creation of a subject index. If the indexer has to attend meetings or undertake extra jobs, such as keyword lists for CD-ROM search or author indexes, these should be quoted for separately. In addition, extra work caused by last-minute changes to the text or pagination requires extra payment. Many indexers do the first two hours of editing free but then charge an hourly rate for other changes.

Use of an index to a previous edition of the book may help with the selection of terms, but it usually makes little difference to the time taken to index a book. If there are only minor changes, it may be possible to edit the original index. This is best done by the original indexer, if they are available. If not, copyright and moral rights need to be considered.

For big projects that are likely to take many months, add about 10% of the estimated cost to allow for contingencies, and invoice monthly (on presentation of work to date) to maintain cash flow. Indexers often ask for more elapsed time than they need so they can accept other projects along the way while working part-time on the major project. Some indexers ask for partial payment in advance when working directly for authors.

Ongoing jobs such as journal or database indexing are more likely to be paid per hour or per piece (e.g., per article). Database indexers usually index between one and ten items per hour, depending on the number of fields that are required and the complexity of the subject matter.

When they have completed an index, indexers send an invoice for the job. Number your invoices, and show your own name and contact details, the client’s name and contact details, a description of the work done, the payment formula (e.g., X pages at \$Y per page) and payment requirements (e.g., within thirty days). In Australia you need to include your Australian Business Number, and the Goods and Services Tax if applicable.

Although most clients are reliable and pay reasonably promptly, problems with payment may arise (as Oscar Wilde said: Genius is born – not paid). Typical situations include:

- An author is unhappy with the index and refuses to pay.
- An invoice gets lost on the way to the pay section.

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- A company goes bankrupt – in which case, as unsecured creditors, freelance indexers are not likely to get paid.
- A company is taken over by another company that does not fulfil earlier obligations.
- The pay system is inefficient; some companies do cheque runs only one day per month, so if you miss that run you have to wait another month.

Some approaches to speed payment are:

- Send a reminder with ‘Overdue’ in large letters.
- Send a letter of demand (you can view a sample at www.artslaw.com.au/LegalInformation/DebtRecovery).
- Speak directly to staff in the pay section, reminding them about late fees.
- Claim copyright in the index and refuse to allow publication until you are paid.
- Take the case to a small claims court: the costs are relatively low and you do not need a lawyer.
- Use a mediation service, such as the one run by the Arts Law Centre of Australia (www.artslaw.com.au/LegalInformation/Mediation.asp).

A contract or written agreement with clearly stated terms can make this process more straightforward. A purchase order is beneficial as it means that the expenditure has already been approved.

Legal matters

Legal matters of importance to indexers include contracts, insurance, copyright and moral rights.

Some indexers use formal contracts for all jobs, but others rely on informal measures. Most make sure that they have a written (e-mailed) agreement covering:

- the agreed fee (plus GST) including charges for extra work
- timing and method for arrival of text, and sending of index
- expectations regarding the length, content, and style of the index
- any special expectations.

Other matters you may wish to cover include your rights to proofread the index, to receive a complimentary copy of the work, and to be acknowledged as indexer and as owner of copyright in the index. Examples of formal contracts for indexing can be found at www.wellchosenword.com/indxctr.htm, pages.prodigy.net/jeanmidd/contract.html and members.aol.com/indexarts/samplecon.htm.

Employ a legal adviser to explain any clauses that are not clear to you, and do not assume that clauses will not be imposed, or accept any verbal guarantees that go against the wording of the contract. Do not accept a clause that says your work shall be ‘satisfactory to the publisher’ unless an independent forum for mediation of disputes is also proposed.