Indexing Training and Work

How many indexers are there/are needed?
How many indexers should we train?
How should potential indexers proceed after initial training?
How can indexers keep the work flowing?

Over the last few years, people have made comments to me on the four inter-related questions listed above, and I thought it might be useful to gather some ideas.

How many indexers are there/are needed?

It is very difficult to estimate the number of indexers in Australia and New Zealand. Firstly, not all indexers are members of ANZSI, and not all ANZSI members are indexers. Secondly, many people do a bit of indexing in their work, but do not consider themselves to be indexers. These people include technical writers, editors, librarians, and authors.

Indexing is now a global business, and potential indexers of Australian material do not necessarily live in Australia. Some large Australian publishers outsource work to editorial and indexing service companies in Malaysia and the Philippines. It is also possible for Australian indexers to seek work overseas, although this seems to happen more on a one-off basis than as a regular occurrence (while outsourcing work away from Australia is more likely to be a large-scale operation, if it happens at all).

My personal experience suggests that at times there are too many indexers seeking work (and we have downtimes) and at other times there are too few indexers available for the work required. I know of jobs that have been offered to more than ten indexers before someone was found who was free to take them on.

How many indexers should we train?

John Simkin in his editorial in the *ANZSI Newsletter* (v. 5, n. 4, May 2009, p.1) discussed supply and demand in training, noting that we train people when branches perceive the demand for training, rather than when we have evaluated an industry need for indexers.

Both indexers and potential indexers have suggested that we shouldn't train more indexers as there is not enough work for them to do. Training too many means that existing indexers struggle to fill their schedules, and the new trainees waste time and money attempting a career in which there is no place for them.

There are problems with setting an artificial limit on training numbers. First, there are peaks as well as troughs in demand for indexers; second, people need the opportunity to experience the market for themselves, and make their own decisions; and third, many people who seek training are not seeking to become freelance indexers, but may be learning indexing to better do their work as editors, or as authors.

ANZSI members also tend to be older than the average worker, so ongoing training is needed to replace indexers who retire or reduce their work load. There are also new fields for indexers to explore (eg, website metadata creation and taxonomy work), so total demand isn't just for existing jobs in traditional publishing. Of course, there may

also be a decline in the demand for indexers over time if search functions replace book indexes. Neither the ups nor downs are easy to predict.

My experience in teaching a range of students is that of every 10 students attempting indexing, most are good, but one is eminently suited to the task. An important part of training is to ensure that this student has the chance to learn.

In addition to basic training, we also need ongoing training in specialist areas for those who want to expand the fields they are able to provide indexing services in.

How should potential indexers proceed after initial training?

While the introductory ANZSI courses are crucial, for most indexers they will not be enough. The intermediate/practical courses offered by various branches provide the next step in training, as they give people experience working on a real book. Similarly, the mentoring programs run in the past by the Victorian branch and ANZSI Council, and currently by the New Zealand branch, and group projects from the ACT Branch, fill this same need. ANZSI Council is also looking at options to expand the range of training opportunities available to indexers throughout Australia.

In this electronic age, no indexer need feel isolated. There are many options for following and initiating discussions on mailing lists relating to indexing in general, software programs, and student experiences. There are also many books and websites to be read and self-directed exercises to do. Participation on a committee and attendance at meetings provides face-to-face contact.

There are also some 'real-life' ways of getting experience:

- employment (limited to a small number of companies which employ full-time or part-time indexers)
- apprenticeship
- paid mentoring
- collegial sharing

Apprenticeship arrangements involve the beginner indexer working with an experienced indexer on a project, with the beginner doing most of the leg work, and the experienced indexer providing ongoing advice and quality control, with the payment being divided according to agreement. These arrangements are not common, probably because most indexers like to know that the output they create is all their own, and because in busy times it can be quicker to finish a job yourself than to guide someone else through it.

Another option is for beginner indexers to pay experienced indexers an hourly rate for advice. This works best when the beginner indexer has found a paid job, but needs some guidance through certain steps in the indexing process (perhaps starting with quoting). It may be that the first job requires six hours advice, the next three, the next two, and then just the occasional phone call. Not many indexers offer these services, but when used it appears to be an approach that works well for both helper and helpee. One beginner indexer wrote: 'Mentoring has provided me with the primary source of help and guidance in indexing since I started indexing some two years ago…if it wasn't for the help of my mentor I would have dropped indexing work long ago.'

Similarly, Pilar Wyman (2009, p.22), in *Starting an indexing business* wrote 'Consulting with an expert is also an excellent option. In fact, paying for expert assistance early on in your indexing career can pay off: You will reap the benefits of learning, and your customers will receive a better product and be more likely to hire you again.'

In addition, indexers are in general a helpful group of people, willing to offer advice to colleagues. Even after 20 years indexing I find there are areas in which I need to ask experienced colleagues for advice. The only problem is, there is a limit to the degree to which experienced indexers can help all beginners. As one indexer pointed out, 'It's hard to make it worthwhile for the mentor'.

How can indexers keep the work flowing?

The first, second and third proper, paid indexing jobs are crucial for the beginner who is trying to get established as an indexer. It doesn't end there, however, and freelance indexers have an ongoing challenge to balance their workflow so they have all the work they need, but not too much to be manageable. This balancing act is made more difficult because publishing schedules so often slip, and the indexer can never be sure that jobs will come when booked.

Most indexers, in my experience, manage their workflow through having flexible hours, working in evenings and on weekends if needed to finish a job. A few subcontract some of their work, or pair up with another indexer as a team (eg, one doing names and one doing subjects for a biography). When too much work comes, most offer suggestions to the publisher of colleagues who could take on the work.

Beginner indexers are often advised 'Don't give up your day job' – at least until you have had a steady flow of work for a while. Even established indexers may feel more secure with regular, part-time work in another area, meaning that even if few index projects are booked for the next quarter, at least there is some income coming in every week. The downside of this is that when there is a deluge of indexing work, the 'security job' still has to be fitted in.

For job security, it is important to develop a range of clients, with products including text books, trade books, annual reports and journals. This means that even if one area suffers a decline, there should be work in other areas. Journal indexing can be good for spreading the workflow, as you can work on issues as they arrive throughout the year (although you are not usually paid until the end). Retrospective indexing can be good as it tends to have less strict deadlines.

Specialist areas requiring subject knowledge may rely more on in-house indexers (eg, legal looseleaf updating services). To break into these areas indexers may need to do extra study and rely on experts for initial training.

Becoming a professional indexer is a multi-step process, based on training and practical experience gained wherever possible. Maintaining steady work as an indexer can also be an ongoing challenge. Everyone has a different history and entry point into the freelance world, so it would be great to hear from other indexers about their experiences at getting started and developing their careers.

Thanks to Mary Coe, Lorraine Doyle, Frances Paterson, Madeleine Davis, Michael Ramsden, Sherrey Quinn and Max McMaster for helpful comments.

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References

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