Guest Editorial

What's an indexer worth?

In our professional circles, this must surely be the question asked most frequently. It comes from two sources: from those who produce the material to be indexed, authors and publishers; and from indexers, who perform the task. It may well be asked why either of these groups should find it necessary to put the question: surely, the going rate should be well known, as a matter of course, to both.

Unfortunately, we, unlike other professions, have no well established and recognized sets of salary scales, either official (as in the case of registered professions) or unofficial (as in the case of, say, librarianship). Publishers and authors naturally are confused when quotes from indexers for the same job vary greatly. Surely, then, the onus is on indexers to give a responsible answer. Again, this is difficult. Several formulae are available and recommended by indexing societies, based on either an hourly rate or on the number of words in the work to be indexed. Judgement on the part of the indexer is required in applying either of these criteria, as the quote for the final product depends on the indexer’s interpretation of the author’s view of the density of the information in the text. What capacity has the average indexer to make such a judgement? Again, comparison with other professions is relevant. In most cases, the capacity to make judgements is based on the completion of a course of both general and vocational education followed by experience, initially in a supervised situation and then one in which judgement and initiative are expected to be used.

This is certainly not the case with indexers. First, there is no truly professional education for indexing as such, although some courses for other professions, notably librarianship, include elements which are relevant to indexing. Secondly, those who work as full-time indexers, usually concerned with in-put to large data banks, may well have initial supervised experience. However, much indexing activity could best be described as cottage industry: homemakers fitting in the job between periods of domestic activity; people in full-time salaried positions indexing in odd free moments to earn a little extra spending money; retired professionals of all sorts using indexing as a stimulating retirement activity.

This image could well be changed if indexers had available to them a sound professional education. This is envisaged as a post-graduate course, of at least a year’s duration, following a basic tertiary course, preferably specializing in a subject discipline. The vocational course should include study of theories and principles applicable to indexing. The language of the material to be indexed (in our case, the English language) should be studied in courses dealing with index language construction. Techniques, especially computer-assisted ones, should be studied and evaluated (and any course which even so much as mentions a shoebox should be blacklisted). Apart from those mentioned earlier who work full-time in salaried positions, most indexers are likely to be freelance operators, seeking commissions from a variety of sources. For these, the course should include a study of small business management.

Supervised experience for freelance indexers could take the form administered by the Society of Indexers. Registered Indexers help and advise those who are working towards an application for Registered status of the Society of Indexers.

These two bench-marks, the completion of a recognized course of professional education and the recognition given to performance by the achievement of the status of Registered Indexer, should make it much easier to answer that question—what's an indexer worth?

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