Indexers and publishers: their views on indexers and indexing

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Summarises selected results of a recent survey of UK indexers and editors, focusing on work practices, relations between editors and indexers, editors' and indexers' expectations, and the value placed on various characteristics of indexers and indexing.

Indexers are a group of professionals who spend most of their time working alone. They may be linked, at a professional level, by indexing societies such as the Society of Indexers. However, the majority of indexing work is done alone. Indexers are primarily self-employed people who work in direct contact with the publishers. This means that many personal relationships are formed between publishers and indexers, and that each indexer has their own experience which they can draw on, and perhaps also the experience of others that they meet. Small networks are formed, but, inevitably, information about what is happening, how things are changing and developing is difficult to gather from such a disparate set of hardworking professionals, each with their own expertise, background and experience.

This research, undertaken in the UK towards the end of 1995, is intended to go some way towards overcoming this problem. It can also be considered as the first point in establishing trend information on the way indexing and indexers are changing and developing.

Research into indexing has been, and continues to be, undertaken, looking at the way readers use indexes and the implications of this for indexers. I am not aware, however, of any research that has compared the views of publishers and indexers on indexing. Publishers will be looking for the best index they can get, and indexers will be looking to produce the best index possible. It seems logical that this is most likely to happen when there is understanding between the two: of what a publisher thinks of indexing and indexers, and what an indexer thinks of indexing and what makes a good index.

This research, then sets out to compare the views of these two parties — UK indexers and UK editors — with a view to helping both achieve a greater understanding, a better relationship, and ultimately, perhaps, a better index.

Research method

Two questionnaires were developed through discussion with indexers and publishers/packagers. A postal self-completion questionnaire was sent to indexers with the SI October 1995 *Newsletter*. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to give the names of commissioning editors for whom they worked. 250 editors from 122 different companies were suggested, forming the sample base for the second questionnaire.

There were 146 usable responses from Indexers, giving approximately a 15% response rate. 74.8% of respondents were women and 25.2% were men. 123 usable responses were received from editors, giving a 49.2% response rate.

The responses from indexers and publishers were analysed separately using MARQUIS, a dedicated computer research package. Where possible comparisons were drawn between the indexers' responses and the editors' responses.

Where differences are commented on between editors' and indexers' responses, the difference has been tested for statistical significance at 5% confidence levels, to ensure that differences are not due to the nature of the sample, but reflect true differences in the population.

Results

Subject areas covered

The subjects covered by editors and indexers were analysed to see if there was an identifiable bias in the results. Editors covered 50 different subject areas from medical books (21%), science/scientific (9.8%), biographies (8.9%) down to photography (one editor).

Indexers claimed to cover a wider variety of subject matter. 74 different subjects were represented with history (32.9%), biographies (23.3%), earth/natural sciences (23.3%), medical (22.6%) and science/scientific (22.6%) being the most popular, down to the more esoteric subjects such as New Age, Astrology and Criminology. There was also a wide variety of types of book mentioned.

Table 1: top five types of book by indexer and editor

| editors (base = 123)	% mentioning	indexers (base = 146)	% mentioning
educational textbooks	20.3	academic	66.4
illustrated books	18.7	educational textbooks	39.0
academic books	13.8	journals/ periodicals	33.6
reference books	10.6	handbooks/ manuals	9.6
professional books	10.6	children's books	8.9

It is interesting to note that whilst only 13.8% of editors claimed to produce academic books, 66.4% of indexers claim to be specialist in indexing this type of book. This does seem to show a large number of indexers chasing a smaller number of

editors. It is also interesting to note that 18.7% of editors claim to produce illustrated books whilst the number of indexers indexing these is only 2.7%. There may of course be a different understanding of the terms chosen here to describe books, however, it may be worth considering using the descriptions given by the editors as these are the people commissioning the work.

Number of years working as indexers

Table 2 shows the length of time that indexers have been working. The range is from 1 to 39 years with the mean at 12.9 years. Men, on average, have been working for 14.35 years whilst women have been working for 12.43 years. There is no significant difference here between men and women

Table 2: indexers — years working

No. of years
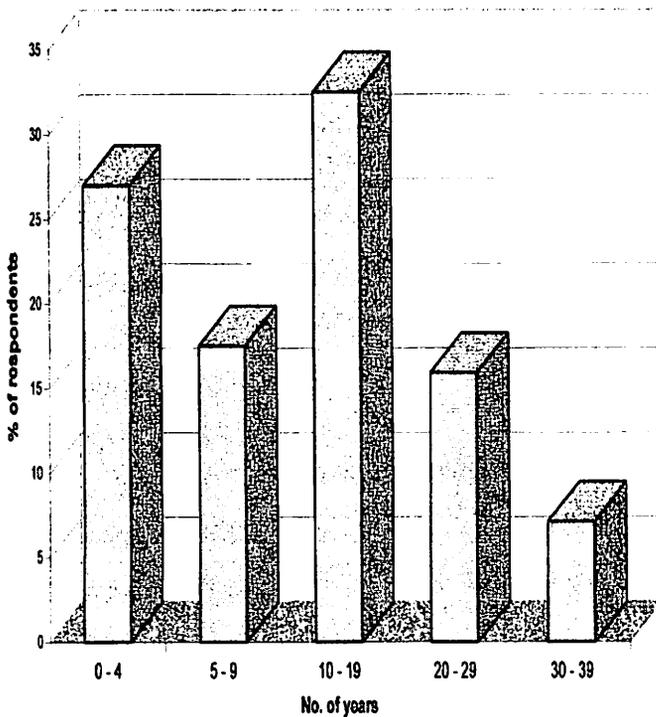
Hours spent on indexing

Indexers spend, on average, 22.4 hours a week working on indexing. This suggests that indexing is not a full time occupation for the majority of indexers, and in fact 66.7% do some other form of paid work. Men work, on average, a little longer than women, at 23.8 hours a week, whilst women work for 22.0 hours per week. The range is from 1 hour to 65 hours a week. The largest number of respondents work for between 20 and 29 hours a week.

The most popular form of other work is proofreading with 51.2% of indexers who do other work, doing this. 41.7% do (copy)editing and 10.7% do some form of teaching/lecturing or tutoring. Also popular are office work, library work, biblio-graphic work, research and authoring. These can all be said to be linked to indexing in some way. Jobs which had nothing to do with indexing include such things as running playgroups, locum conveyancing, knitting, working in the diplomatic service, gardening, lorry driving, working for a charity, and several others.

Indexers spend, on average, 16.8 hours a week on this other work. If this is added to the 22.4 hours average hours a week on indexing we get a very standard 39.2 hour working week, suggesting that the majority of indexers do a full working week, but not all of it on indexing. As with the indexing work, the range of time spent on this other work is very wide, with people working anything from 1 hour to 60 hours. Again, men do a slightly higher average number of hours than women at 18.4 hours compared to 16.3 hours.

Ages of indexers

The average age of respondents is 52.2 years old. Men are a little older than women at 55.5 years compared to 51.1 years. The range is from 28-86.

Why indexers index

Respondents were asked to describe why they had become an indexer. The responses were then allocated to categories. Some respondents gave more than one reason, therefore in table 3, the number of mentions will add up to more than the total number of respondents.

Table 3: top ten reasons for indexing

Reason for Indexing	no. of mentions
Fitted in with looking after family	60
Like the job/ interested in it/ challenging/ stimulating	34
Accidental/ introduced to it by a friend/ colleague	31
Natural progression from previous job	29
Work that can be done at home	23
Independent/ autonomous/ flexibility/ enjoy working for oneself	17
Following redundancy/ period of unemployment	13
Suit retirement	12
Supplement other income	8
Job which can be done in rural location	8

One respondent commented that it suited her "filing cabinet mind". Accidental reasons included "husband's boss needed an index doing" and "discovered it in a library book when job hunting". As the most popular reason was that it fitted in with looking after a family, it would seem natural to suppose that a number of young people could be attracted to the job now for similar reasons. However, with the change in work practices taking place elsewhere, such as working from home, or flexible hours, and the improvement in career breaks for women with young children, it may be necessary to think of other ways of attracting young people to indexing in the future.

Indexers' qualifications

Indexers are a well qualified group of people. The average number of qualifications is two per person. 48% have a BA, 19% a BSc, 27% a Masters and 9% have a PhD. 17% have librarian qualifications. 10% have teaching qualifications and only 5.5% either did not state their qualification or have no qualifications.

Other areas of qualification were law, theology, information science, nursing and a number of vocational qualifications.

Payment for indexing

Both indexers and editors were asked about the hourly rate paid to indexers and what methods of payment they used other than an hourly rate. Table 4 compares the results for editors and indexers.

Table 4: hourly rates paid

rate paid/ received	Indexers	Editors
Average hourly rate	£11.27	£11.05
Minimum rate paid	£3.50	£7.00
Maximum rate paid	£30.00	£17.50

The averages are very similar but the range is much greater for indexers than publishers. This suggests that indexers are 'manipulating' their rates in order to achieve what they consider to be a reasonable price per job, or what they know they can expect from particular publishers. Both averages are very close to the SI minimum rate, and many of the editors said that they paid whatever this was.

The hourly rate was most common for 68.4% of indexers, with 17% saying that the fixed price was most common. 22.7% of editors did not pay an hourly rate. If they did not pay hourly rates then they tended to use a page rate. Page rates ranged from £0.85 to £1.20 per page, although editors did comment that this would vary according to complexity etc.

32.7% of indexers had had no problems with receiving payments although 58.2% had had trouble with late payments. 7.3 % had had payments contested and 9.1% had had their payment 'lost'. On the whole, problems did not seem to be of great concern.

For 93% of indexers the most common way of getting paid was by cheque in response to an invoice. 4.3% said direct bank credit was the most common and 2.6% were being paid by monthly or regular salary. There was also evidence that the direct credit payment system was increasing in usage.

Editors were asked whether there was a variation in the hourly rates they paid and what that variation depended upon. Table 5 shows the results of this question:

Table 5: variation of hourly rates

reason for rate variation	% respondents (base = 83)
Indexer quoting rate	75.9
Complexity of index	53.0
Experience of indexer	39.8
Type of book	25.3
Historical reason	8.4

The most common reason was because the indexer quoted a different rate to the editor's normal rate which they felt prepared to accept. The complexity of the index was also an important

factor as was the experience of the indexer. Presumably this could work both ways i.e. a more experienced indexer getting more, but a less experienced indexer getting less.

Editors: years in publishing

On average, respondents had spent 11.2 years in publishing with the range from 1 year to 40 years. The average number of years spent commissioning indexes was 6.5 years, but again the range was broad, from 0.7 years to 23 years.

Editors: indexes commissioned

Editors were also asked how many indexes they commissioned each year. 27.6% commissioned between 11 and 20 a year with 23.6% commissioning 6-10 and the same percentage commissioning 3-5. 15.4% commissioned more than 20 a year with just 9.8% commissioning 1 or 2 a year. These sets of data suggest a large amount of experience amongst the respondents.

Indexers working for editors; editors choosing indexers

Editors were asked how many different indexers they regularly used. 9% use one indexer only and 66% said that they have a first choice indexer who they would normally go to. Respondents were asked what influenced their choice of indexer, and Table 6 summarises results:

Table 6: influences on choice

Influence on choice	% respondents (base = 96)
Subject matter	91.7
Subject knowledge of indexer	75.0
Experience of indexer	72.9
Complexity of book	67.7
Cost of indexer	38.5

Editors were also asked how many indexers they regularly used. Their answers are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: number of indexers used by editors:

No. of indexers used	% respondents (base = 123)
1 or 2	27.0
3 to 5	45.1
6 to 10	22.1
11 to 15	3.3
16 to 20	1.6
more than 20	0.8

The largest group used between 3 and 5 indexers which shows the loyalty of editors to indexers with whom they are happy.

57.4% of editors said that the number of indexes they commissioned had stayed the same over the past five years, with 35.2% seeing an increase.

60.2% of indexers said they had seen an increase in their amount of work over the past 5 years, with 25.7% feeling it was

about the same.

We can see a disagreement here between the publishers and the indexers, with the indexers painting a rosier picture than the editors. 7.4% of editors had seen a decrease in the amount of work compared to 14.2% of the indexers. The decreases noted by indexers were often because they had decided to reduce the amount of work they did, not because they could not get the work to do.

Indexers were also asked whether they were working for a similar number of editors, or whether there had been a change. 50.6% had noted an increase, only 8.3% had noted a decrease. 11.0% were working for the same number and the same editors whilst 24.8% were working for the same number but different editors.

When editors were asked whether they had changed the number of indexers they regularly used the following picture emerged. 41.5% had seen an increase, but 52.8% felt that they were using the same number, whilst only 5.7% had seen a decrease.

There is a slight discrepancy between the editors and the indexers figures, but largely we see the same picture appearing form both sets of results.

Indexers finding work; editors finding indexers

Indexers were asked how they went about finding work and editors were asked how they went about finding indexers.

Table 8: how editors and indexers find each other

Indexers base = 121	%	Editors base = 116	%
Name in Indexers Available	80.2	Use Indexers Available	48.3
Phone editors	27.3	Received phone call/letter	57.8
Annual/periodic mailshots	20.7	Inherited list of names	67.2
Word of mouth recommendations	15.7	Phone indexer for recommendation	36.2
Attend conferences	NA	Phone SI Registrar	12.9
Name in other directories	NA	Asked author	8.6
Advertising	NA	consult own database of freelancers	NA
Asked by authors	NA		
Personal contacts	NA		
Indexers referring work	NA		

Entries in the table above with no percentage figures were methods suggested by one or two indexers/editors but not part of the main list of options.

The majority of editors have inherited a list of names which they use, but also seem to respond well to phone calls or letters. Obviously in this case, the skills of the indexer must be matched to the editor's requirements, however with editors consulting databases of freelancers, sending letters or mailshots may be a good method of finding a way onto these databases.

Editors and the Society of Indexers

Editors were asked about their ownership, and usage, of the SI publication, *Indexers available*.

> 52.8% of editors have *Indexers available*, 39% do not have it, and 8.1% do not know if they have it.
>
> 15.4% have used the publication regularly, 70.8% have used it from time to time, 4.6% have used it once, and 9.2% have never used it.
>
> 66.1% of editors responding have never contacted the Society of Indexers; 33% have contacted SI for names of indexers.
>
> Only 3.5% have contacted SI for information on indexing, 7% on costs and 1.7% to settle disputes.

Editors were asked what they felt to be the function of the Society of Indexers. The most commonly mentioned function was that of standard setting/ providing assurance of the standard of work (31 mentions). 24 editors felt that it should, as it in fact does, compile a register of indexers of good standard. 17 editors felt that assessing standards and providing training, evaluation and accreditation were important services. 16 felt that it should publicize a core of well trained and qualified individuals and advertise their services. 11 felt that it should be an information source for indexers and that it should support indexers. Obviously its role as a body to guarantee the standard of indexers is very important and in line with the role of most professional bodies. Perhaps there is a greater role for the Society in increasing awareness of its services and the services of its members.

Indexing qualifications and training

34.7% of indexers are Registered Indexers, 18.1% are Accredited Indexers and 47.2% are neither.

Of those that are neither registered or accredited, the majority expect to train to become either accredited or registered. Registered status is more popular with these indexers.

Of those that are accredited 88% intend to apply for registered status.

69% of editors were aware that the SI offered qualifications to indexers and 63% knew of the registered and accredited distinctions.

Awareness of the qualifications is high, whilst awareness of the nature of these qualifications is lower. There is support for the two qualifications but when asked to comment on their views on employing qualified as opposed to non-qualified indexers, editors found it hard to make a distinction between the two qualifications.

Qualities that make a good indexer

Both sets of respondents were asked for their views on what qualities were necessary to produce a good indexer. Respondents were free to choose any words they liked to describe those qualities and were asked to give up to four qualities. These responses were then combined into relevant categories and a top ten list produced for the indexers and for the editors.

Table 9 shows the top ten qualities as identified by the indexers and the editors and the position given to each quality by the other group of respondents.

The most important quality for editors is that of reliability, which whilst in the indexers top ten, is not considered as important by them. Both editors and indexers consider accuracy

Table 9: top qualities

quality	position given by		quality	position given by	
	editors	Indexers		Indexers	editors
reliability	1	5	accuracy	1	2
accuracy	2	1	attention to detail	2	5
working to deadlines	3	15	understanding needs of reader/ author/ publisher	3	12
consistency	4	4	consistency	4	4
attention to detail	5	2	reliability	5	1
conscientiousness/ thoroughness	6	23	organised mind	6	14
ability to work independently	7	NA	patience	7	20
versatility/flexibility	8	12	knowledge of subject	8	10
intelligence	9	16	perseverance	9	26
knowledge of subject	10	8	self-discipline	10	NA

Reliability here means reliability of the indexer, whereas consistency means their ability to produce a consistent index.

to be important, but editors couple this with the importance of meeting deadlines which is ranked 16th by indexers.

Editors consider it important for indexers to work independently. This was not commented on at all by indexers, probably because they would consider it to be a pre-requisite of the job and not worth commenting on. It is interesting to note the importance attributed to it by the editors and perhaps suggests that they are looking for evidence of this in the indexers they employ.

Indexers do talk of self-discipline as being important and this is indeed necessary to enable them to work independently. Consistency is considered to be important by both editors and indexers, each ranking this 4th in their lists.

It is important to note what an editor thinks is important, and therefore what they are looking for in an indexer. Many indexers may well feel they have the required qualities, but it is important to make that clear to new editors and in any advertising or publicity carried out. It may also be interesting to inform new indexers of the qualities required so that they can try to develop these as they train.

Editors were also asked what they felt were the benefits of using a professional indexer in contrast to using the author or a computer to compile an index. These quotes are representative of the views expressed:

"Most authors do not understand the conventions of indexes, nor how to structure one, particularly with any complexity. Authors are too close to their materials, an objective approach is important. Given that computer spell checkers are feeble, I shudder to think what a computer package would do, except for the simplest jobs".

"Professional indexers know how to properly structure entries/ sub-entries/ sub-sub entries etc., making the index more useful; they will also adapt the index to the level of the intended reader and how they will use it."

"The nature of our publication and tight deadlines means that a professional indexer is needed".

"In the long run it saves both time and money. Authors are not indexers, nor should they be".

"An indexer will follow alphabet order when ordering entries (authors rarely do) and will have made intelligent assessment of names and subjects to be included".

"Speed. Generally less time is taken in briefing and then editing the index, and we are able to be more specific about delivery dates and standards because we are buying a service".

The majority of views showed that editors felt that using a professional indexer was the best way to get a good index. In a sense, this is not surprising as the respondents to this questionnaire are likely to be those editors who feel positive about indexing and indexers, otherwise they may not have taken the time and trouble to respond, nor would they have been likely to be suggested by the indexers in the first place. Despite this, their views are relevant and show the main reasons why editors would be likely to use indexers.

A few responses to this question suggested that in certain circumstances authors might well be used to produce an index. The following is representative of those views:

"I suppose there is some benefit in having an indexer other than the author in the sense that as an 'outsider' the indexer will approach the book from the point of view of the reader. On the whole, however, particularly with academic books, I would prefer the author to compose his/her own index."

As a regular user of academic indexes, I would encourage the changing of this view as many of the indexes I am forced to use are not of a sufficiently high quality to make them useful!

Editors' opinions of indexers and indexing

Editors were asked for their level of agreement to a series of statements on a five point scale. Table 10 shows the average scores for 10 of the statements, ranked in order of importance.

Table 10: editors' opinions

rank	statement	score
1	Indexing is as important as any stage in producing a book	4.03
2	Most indexers give good value for money	3.94
3	Indexing is a profession like any other	3.65
4	Indexing is a creative process	3.57
5	The index can make or break the book	3.47
6	Indexing is a full time job for most indexers	3.38
7	Indexers should pick up errors/ inconsistencies in proofs	3.12
8	Indexing seems to be generally underpaid	2.89
9	Indexers always want more advance warning of a job than I can provide	2.71
10	Indexing is a repetitive mechanical task	2.61

There is high level of agreement that indexers provide value for money, and generally disagreement that indexers ask for more time than is necessary. The overall results here suggest that editors are happy with the service they are getting. There is also a high level of agreement that indexing is as important a stage in the production of a book as any other. Coupled with this is agreement that indexing is generally creative rather than repetitive. This is all very positive. Again, this could be influenced by the nature of the respondents, but it does show the way editors perceive the process of producing an index.

Producing a good index

Editors and indexers were asked to say how important a series of elements were in producing a good index and providing a good service to editors. Agreement was on a 5 point scale, the higher the score, the greater the level of agreement.

Table 11 shows the level of agreement of editors and indexers with the various statements, ranked by the most important elements according to the editors.

Indexers think it is more important to respond immediately to letters and to be knowledgeable about the subject than do the editors. Indexers also feel it is more important to respond to different editor's needs than do the editors. This is not really surprising as editors want consistency for themselves, but are less likely to care whether other editors are also getting a consistent service!

The elements which both editors and indexers felt was the least important was meeting face-to-face and immediate service. However, the first nine statements gained a level of agreement above four from the editors, showing how important they feel they are in achieving a good service from indexers.

Table 11: service qualities

rank	statement	editors score	indexers score
1	An indexer must be dependable	4.83	4.92
2	An indexer must keep promises on timing	4.56	4.83
3	Indexers must give firm delivery dates	4.56	4.35
4	Indexers must be 100% consistent	4.49	4.58
5	Indexes must be 100% accurate	4.45	4.62
6	Editors/ authors must be available to answer queries etc	4.29	4.19
7	Trust and confidence between editor and indexer are essential	4.22	4.33
8	Indexers must respond to the differing needs of individual publishers	4.21	4.61
9	Indexers should be proactive in solving publisher's problems	4.13	4.66
10	Indexers must be computer literate and competent at computer indexing	3.89	3.45
11	Indexers must respond immediately to letters etc. from publishers	3.72	4.47
12	Indexers must be knowledgeable about the subject	3.52	4.31
13	It is realistic for publishers to expect immediate service	2.59	2.77
14	It is important for the indexer to meet the editor face-to-face	2.07	2.04

Indexers and computers

Editors were also asked about the need for certain types of equipment. The most important piece of equipment, according to both indexers and editors is the computer, with the answerphone a close second. There does not seem to be a real need to have an Email number at the moment, although this will be worth tracking over time to see if the need increases.

Indexers were asked whether they used computers in indexing. 87.2% said yes and 12.8% (18 respondents) said no. Of those that did not currently use either a computer or a word processor only 3 said that they did not intend to start using one in the future. The majority, in late 1995, used computers with 486 processors.

70.7% of indexers stated that between 90 and 100% of the editors for whom they worked required indexes on disk, with 12.1% stating that between 80 and 89% required this and 6.1% stating that between 70 and 79% did. This compares with editors of whom 92.7% said that they required indexes submitted on disk and with a hard copy. Only 3.3% required just hard copy and 4.1% required just a disk.

Both editors and indexers were asked what they felt to be the benefit of using computers in indexing. They were asked to rate their agreement with different statements on a scale of 1 to 5.

The most important benefits, as stated by indexers, are that computers allow time to be saved, and that they can respond to publishers' needs. As 96.8% of editors required indexes on disks, it can be seen as a pre-requisite.

In general, editors do not see the same benefits as do the indexers, although one or two statements do stand out as being