Indexing as a professional activity

Elizabeth Wallis

Discusses indexer professionalism in relation to training and accreditation, with specific reference to the Society of Indexers registration and accreditation programmes.

Is indexing a professional activity? Can a society for indexers be viewed as professional if it fails to offer recognition of the competence of its members?

If the outcome of professionalism is service to the client, then assurance of competence must be an essential element. It would seem to follow then that training and recognition of the quality of that training through registration or accreditation must surely be of significance to the credibility of that profession.

Are indexers professionals? If not, what then are they? Seven key characteristics that distinguish professionals have been defined as:

- possess a specialised skill enabling them to offer a specialised service;
- undergo intellectual and practical training in a well-defined area of study;
- maintain detachment and integrity in exercising personal judgement on behalf of a client;
- establish direct, personal relations with a client, based on confidence, faith and trust;
- collectively have a particular sense of responsibility for maintaining the competence and integrity of the profession as a whole;
- tend or are required to avoid certain manners of attracting business;
- are organised in bodies which, with or without state intervention, are concerned to provide the machinery for testing competence and regulating standards of competence and conduct.

(Taken from the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report The supply of professional services, 1970.)

Many of the above seven tenets are incorporated in the Society of Indexers' Recommended Practice for Indexers which is printed in its annual listing of professional indexers, Indexers available. It reads:

An indexer should:

1. Support the aims and the objectives of the Society of Indexers, in order to ensure continuing high standards of indexing.
2. Achieve and maintain competence in professional indexing practice with regard to relevant standards.
3. Keep up to date with the development of knowledge in his/her chosen subjects.
4. Compile indexes to a text on a specialist subject only with adequate knowledge of the specialist and competence to deal with the intellectual level of the text under consideration.
5. Discuss requirements with clients, advise on details of indexing with which the client may not be familiar and follow the agreed specification.
6. Handle in a polite and equable manner problems, queries and complaints which may arise during the compilation of an index.
7. Adhere to the agreed dates for the delivery of a commissioned index and inform the client immediately of any problems which may affect prompt delivery.
8. Be aware that he/she is entitled to assert moral and/or economic rights in accordance with the copyright legislation.
9. Agree a fair and appropriate fee for a commissioned index, declining an unrealistic fee unless there are extenuating circumstances.

There has been much controversy within the Society of Indexers about the level of competence required to qualify for entry in Indexers Available, SI's directory of practising indexers available for work. The American Society of Indexers (ASI) does not require proof of competence for its directory: Indexer Services. Like Indexers Available, ASI’s Indexer Services is an annual directory of freelance indexers and their areas of speciality, sent free to listed indexers and publishers.

A controversial issue

Why is the question of accreditation for indexers then so controversial? From the USA, Australia and UK the same debate is mounted within the indexing societies over the necessity or desirability for indexers to have their competence in indexing tested and to undergo training to that end.

John Simkin, speaking for the Australian Society, says the question of accreditation or registration comes down to who requires the registration or accreditation. It gives evidence of professional competence (and in Australia competency standards are used across a wide range of industries). From the employer's/ editor's perspective all they require is that the person they employ, whether in-house or in a freelance basis, is competent and has the necessary knowledge and experience to perform the indexing task. [John Simkin's own article on professionalism is in this issue of The Indexer pp. 178-181]

SI accreditation (see below) may be viewed as equivalent to obtaining a basic qualification, prior to obtaining professional experience. Apart from the professional image of having obtained an indexing diploma, what purpose does it serve, and who wants it? For the indexer it is a stepping stone to further advancement, whilst the publisher is generally unlikely or unwilling to employ someone with so little indexing experience (analogous to the situation of any new graduate). Only after indexers have gained some 'real' indexing experience can they become truly professional, and so become more readily employable.
Professional competence

Professional competence is recognised in two stages by the British Society. Accredited Indexers are those who have passed the Society’s standard tests, and have therefore shown theoretical competence in indexing. Registered Indexers have exhibited practical competence through SI’s index assessment procedure and have been admitted to the Register of Indexers.

Accreditation

Accredited status is achieved in the following way. Members can purchase and complete test papers that are set and marked by the Society. Successful completion of all five formal tests (equivalent to each unit of the Society’s training course) will entitle a member of the Society to the status of Accredited Indexer. Test papers can only be taken one at a time and there is a set time for completion. Candidates work at home and may use all available reference and instruction materials while taking each test. If an answer paper is not up to standard, an interval is required before a resit; but meanwhile a trainee may complete and submit the test papers of another unit. Markers do not know the names of candidates or what training they have had.

These tests are available to any Society members who wish to gain credits towards Accreditation. Most applicants take the tests following completion of each of the five units of the Society of Indexers open learning course, but candidates may take the tests on the basis of study other than that offered by SI.

Registration

Attainment of the status of Registered Indexer should be the aim of every Accredited Indexer after some experience of indexing work. At present, candidates submit an index plus its original text for assessment, and if they are judged by the two (or sometimes three) Assessors who individually evaluate the index to have sufficient ability and competence to be confidently recommended to clients through publication of their name in Indexers Available or by the Registrar, then they will be admitted to the Register and entitled to the designation “Registered Indexer of the Society of Indexers”. Currently, indexers will remain Registered as long as they remain a member of the Society. Anonymity is required for the assessment process. A fee is charged to cover assessment expenses.

An applicant must fall into one of the following categories:

• have practical experience in indexing and have had several indexes published.
• have satisfactorily completed an indexing course or had practical indexing experience (not necessarily resulting in a published index).
• in rare cases, have other suitable indexing and indexing-related experience.

The index submitted must:

• be the unaided work of the applicant (a revision of an earlier index by another person is not usually considered suitable, nor is work done under supervision).
• have been produced during the last three years.
• be complex enough to show mastery of the full range of indexing skills, including analytical indexing with subheadings and cross-references, but not to be so specialised that it cannot be readily assessed.
• have required the applicant to make decisions regarding selection of concepts and choice and formation of index terms (merely following a pattern specified by a publisher will not suffice).
• be in paper form; microform and electronic media indexes cannot be accepted at present.
• be perfectly legible and easily handled.
• be able to stand as many as six journeys through the post (thus requiring strong packaging).
• conform to British Standards. Clients’ style variations may be acceptable if explained in answers to an accompanying self-assessment questionnaire. An index to a general text of 200 pages would be suitable, or one to a shorter, more complex or specialised text. An index to a periodical in annual volume form is acceptable, but not one to a multivolume work. The index need not have been published.

Self-assessment questionnaire

Answering the self-assessment questionnaire, which must be submitted with the text and index to be evaluated, enables applicants to make their own critical analyses of their indexes. It may be that after reading the questionnaire, the applicant will wish to choose another index to submit.

The answers provide the Assessors with a guide to the indexing techniques employed by the applicant. The questions may be used to explain unusual or complex features and to describe any restrictions or requirements specified by the client, for example variation from British Standard specifications.

Answers to the questionnaire are not marked or graded. It is the index itself that is assessed. The answers should serve to illuminate and explain the indexer’s approach to the compilation of the index.

The questions are divided into seven categories:

• general, covering amendments and second thoughts, working methods, accuracy and proofreading.
• presentation and helpfulness to intended users, location references and strings, relevance of location references, introductory note and alternative presentation.
• comprehensiveness and density of detail including length in relation to text, coverage, contents additional to text (appendices, illustrations etc), omissions, excesses and multiple index sequences.
• headings and subheadings formation including suitability and consistency of index terms, synonyms, antonyms, abbreviations, acronyms, symbols, sources of headings, specific (direct) or classified (hierarchical) entry, and inversions.
• subheading and sub-subheading arrangement, method of layout, clarity of arrangement and treatment of prepositions and conjunctions.
• cross-references, including synonyms, variations from text terminology, ‘see’ and ‘see also’ cross-references, double entry, and circular cross-references.
• additional points not covered by preceding questions.

The decision of the Assessors is final. Safeguards exist to protect borderline cases with a third Assessor’s opinion. Applicants receive a written evaluation based on the assessors’ reports whether they pass or fail.
Indexing as a professional activity

It is true that most editors do not demand any proof of an indexer's professional training, but they will demand that a good job be done. They will also expect, if they ask the Society to recommend an indexer, some measure of confidence that the work will be well done and that they are not being offered the services of incompetent people. It is also likely that the level of proficiency required by the Society to satisfy Accreditation or Registration status is of little interest to the publisher. It may then seem that the Society is being unnecessarily bureaucratic in demanding proof of ability and competence from those on whose behalf they are advertising services. But how can a professional association retain credibility or have confidence in itself if it is merely an advertising service for people, self-styled as indexers, who wish to earn a living in a certain way?

Another problem for indexers is that the standard form of author contract in England, Australia, and the United States requires the author to provide the index or to pay the publisher to provide one. I would suggest that as long as this attitude persists in publishing, it indicates that publishers do not really believe indexing to be a truly professional activity with all that that implies. It suggests that they believe any person intelligent enough to write a book is capable of producing an index. It is true that some authors are excellent indexers, but it is not true that many are. It is unfortunate that publishers will print inadequate indexes by authors and other lay people.

In the UK Society there is also an internal problem of the credibility of qualifications. Some members cast doubt on Registration because it has such a high failure rate. This means to them either that the pass rate is so low as to be totally unrealistic for the commercial indexer or that assessments are incompetent. They are worried about the subjectivity of the Assessors and the lack of standardisation of assessments. The fact that an outside body of repute does not validate them is also a drawback. Accreditation and Registration are essentially one-off tests and there is currently no requirement to be re-tested to ensure that the level of competence is maintained.

Members who do not qualify to have their names published in Indexers Available may then take a negative view of Accreditation and Registration. Other, prestigious, indexers do not require their services to be advertised as they have more than enough work. This opposition or indifference makes the pursuit of standards of competence for indexing difficult and contentious. A working group of the Society is now considering proposals for the development and improvement of the registration process.

So do indexers wish to think they are professionals? Can we consider our associations to be professional if we do not offer training and qualifications? I would maintain on the evidence above that we cannot.

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