Why indexing?

In this collection of pieces, several indexers of varying levels of experience (the four members of the ‘Yellow Spot’ guest editorial team) share their background employment experiences, their initial reasons for wanting to train in indexing, and their thoughts on their early indexing projects.

Rohan Bolton

It is not a total surprise that I have turned to indexing as a second career. I am a qualified librarian, having been a guinea pig on the first degree course in librarianship at Leeds Polytechnic in the early 1970s. I spent most of my career working in a range of special libraries, including two years in a research library at Sussex University and a company headquarters in Belgium (Mister Minit, the key cutting and shoe repair company), followed by seven years each in the House of Commons Library and the European Parliament information office in London.

Special libraries often have their own system of arranging material rather than using an established classification system, so I had varied experience with researching and compiling classification systems, subject indexes and thesauri. These ranged from a small business studies classification scheme to the POLIS thesaurus being developed for the first Houses of Parliament computer database. Another of my responsibilities in the Commons Library was supervising the subject headings that were used for the newspaper cuttings and the strip indexes containing references to Parliamentary Questions and other official material. Of course for this type of work there is only one heading allocated to each item with no possibility of multiple access. The provision of cross-references and the use of double or even multiple entries in back-of-the-book and journal indexing bring with them a completely different set of problems.

Since my daughter was born in 1988 I have been lucky enough to find freelance work from home as a researcher specializing in the European and political reference field. I very much enjoy keeping my brain active without returning to work in an office with the hassle of a daily commuting grind, and appreciate the flexibility, especially in terms of being able to work my own hours. I am a fairly disciplined person and I have never had a problem with leaving the unwashed breakfast dishes and walking upstairs to my study!

It is a measure of how times have changed that I was able to research the material for a journal and several books while working entirely from home; before the advent of computers and modern communication technology it would have been almost impossible to do this efficiently outside a normal office environment.

One major project was the production of Vacher’s European Companion, a quarterly European reference journal which had been a key information source when I was working in EU documentation. I had always felt the lack of an index. It seemed somewhat paradoxical that a quick-reference book should have no access points other than a small contents page, so one of the first things I did was to prepare a subject index. In retrospect I chose a very time-consuming and unsystematic method to compile it, sorting it using the alphabetical sort functions within Word tables, but I found it very satisfying to produce. Just before it was due to go to the publisher I showed it to a former colleague from the House of Commons Library who was now an Accredited member of the Society of Indexers. She had a couple of suggestions to make, and I was surprised to be told that subject terms don’t generally have capital letters.

Back in 2003 I began to think about expanding my horizons, as I wanted to try to organize a second string to my bow while still working from home. I had a chat with my indexer friend, Sue Martin, as she seemed to find her indexing career very varied, interesting and enjoyable, and took the plunge, sending off the cheque to join the Society of Indexers and beginning the training course. My experiences of learning the rules for successful professional indexing and coming to terms with the painstaking, exacting nature of the process are described elsewhere in this issue.

Rohan Bolton has been a freelance European Union researcher since 1988 and an Accredited Indexer since early 2005. Having graduated with a degree in Librarianship, her previous career included seven years in the House of Commons Library and the same period as the Information Officer in the European Parliament’s London office. Email: rohan@efs-consult.demon.co.uk

Hilary Faulkner

I came to indexing from a point of total, shameful ignorance. For someone who is trying to make ‘student’ the major career heading on her CV, and has therefore read a lot of academic texts in a variety of subjects, it is embarrassing to admit that I gave no thought to where indexes came from. They were tagged on to the end of the book. Sometimes they were useful. Sometimes they were not. But as to how they got there – they could have been the work of enslaved demons for all I knew, or indeed cared.

There came a time when, after an extended career break spent concentrating on home and family, with a little illicit childminding thrown in (and an Open University degree), I had to think seriously about earning some proper money. I had previously worked as a nurse and knew I did not want to go back to that. I live in a small rural community, with few employment opportunities, 20 miles from the nearest reasonably sized town. I do not drive and the local bus service, though totally reliable, is not wide ranging. Commuting to work did not seem an attractive option. Plus there was the whole business of having to go ‘out there’.
Why indexing?

I spent a lot of time on the Internet, researching working from home. I came across lots of get-rich-quick schemes, lots of opportunities that seemed less inviting than having fillings replaced, and proofreading. Working from home, suitable for a bookish person. Could be me. Of course there was some other stuff about being thorough and methodical, but I thought I could learn that. With help from my tutor I completed the Publishing Training Centre course. And through that I heard about indexing.

Something about indexing intrigued me, and I spent more time on the Internet finding out as much as I could from the websites of the various indexing associations and those of individual indexers. One thing I read that struck a chord was on Dawn Spencer's website: if you hate having someone look over your shoulder indexing is for you. I think that clinched it for me. All the practical considerations seemed to fit, but the most important was whether I was temperamentally suited to indexing. I knew I was going to have to work hard to complete the training, and then even harder to launch and maintain myself in business.

I completed the Society of Indexers course in 2004 after an extended break during which I spent two years working from home as a researcher for a professional body. I have now been indexing professionally for a year, and currently combine this with postgraduate study. Indexing gives me something different to do and supplements my research grant. I happily approach academics and fellow postgrads and tell them that I am an indexer and they should remember this when they write their next book.

I get a buzz every time I print out an index, because I wrote it.

Hilary Faulkner is a freelance indexer and a PhD student in the Centre for Applied Social Research, University of Durham, UK. Email: Hilary.Faulkner@btinternet.com

Paula Peebles

It's a cliché for sure, but I'm told that growing up I really did always have my nose in a book. Happily for me, little has changed.

Unlike the many indexers from a library background, I came into indexing via proofreading. I had wanted to be a proofreader from the moment I discovered that such a job existed from a school careers adviser. I joined the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) and took a distance-learning course in proofreading and copy-editing while I was at university studying English literature. I first started writing to publishers when I graduated, but understandably did not get very far at this stage as I had no experience. It was time to get a proper job.

My first post was in housing benefits, but I dreamt of working in publishing. After a couple of years I relocated to Manchester. I initially worked at an examinations board, handling different stages of proofs of the question papers. I then gained my first in-house position as a proofreader at a magazine publisher. I learnt a great deal about working to tight deadlines and liaising with journalists, graphic designers, typesetters and printers. Following this I worked at a large printers with an entire proofreading department. The printers had several well-known clients, and we would check everything from a single business card up to annual reports and prospectuses. Here I gained valuable insight into the printing process – everything from copywriting, through design and typesetting, to printing and finishing.

Around this time I started to contact publishers again, but now I had some proofreading experience. I started to gain a client or two, and began freelancing at evenings and weekends. The work gradually built up, with new clients coming from the letters I'd sent and from the SfEP directory, and I left my job to become a full-time freelance proofreader and copy-editor about six months after I started freelancing.

I probably first became aware of indexing through the SfEP, and I contacted the Society of Indexers to find out more. I enrolled on the training course in late 2001 and began investing in the recommended books and standards. Something instantly felt 'just right' for me about indexing when I started training. I very much identified with Nancy Mulvany's comment: 'Book indexing is something you will either enjoy or detest; there is little middle ground. You will have a knack for it or you won't' (Mulvany, 1994: vii).

As I was already an editorial freelancer, I was in the fairly fortunate position of having a client base to approach. When I passed Accreditation in early 2003 some of my existing clients started to offer me indexing work. I think combining skills in this way can work well. I am often sent books to both proofread and index (the great advantage being that I have read the book in full before I start to index), and have in the past copy-edited, proofread and indexed the same title. I must admit that it can get a bit much reading the same book three times over, particularly if it wasn't exactly riveting the first time!

I have been freelancing for over four years now, and indexing professionally for two. I can't honestly see myself ever wanting to change career; it's certainly curtailed my interest in newspaper jobs pages. I love the fact that every job is a new book that I have never read before; even if the content is less than gripping, I always learn something. I find that indexing requires that I engage with and 'get inside' the book in a completely different way from proofreading or copy-editing, but I like having the variety of the separate skills. Indexing is usually harder work for me, but such mental stimulation is part of the attraction. My freelance work has also prompted a return to study: I am part-way through an Open University degree in psychology, as I enjoy working on books in this field.

Looking to the future, I have a few plans for my next steps in indexing. I am beginning to consider applying for Registration, as I believe it is a worthwhile higher qualification in indexing. I wish to build up the indexing side of my freelance business through marketing to new clients, although I would not want to give up proofreading and copy-editing entirely. I am also keen to continue my involvement with the Society of Indexers, through local groups, conferences, workshops and so on. I'm really enjoying getting to know more indexers this way; it's helped me a lot with the potential isolation of freelancing. I am in awe of so many of the indexers I've met and read.
about, and have huge respect for anyone who successfully pursues this career. I believe that I have found my vocation – and I feel truly lucky.

Paula Peebles is a freelance indexer, copy-editor and proofreader, working mainly in the humanities and social sciences. She is an Advanced Member of the SfEP and is the North-West group representative on the Society of Indexers Consultative Council. Email: paula@p-space.co.uk

Margaret Vaudrey

My son recently bought a book without an index (Heuvelmans, 2003; also cited in Shuttleworth, 2004) and he suggested the following:

Eldest son buys the definitive book on giant octopus and squid and despite the princely sum paid for it there is no index. His kind and thoughtful mother notices his sad face and immediately decides that never again will a young child have his childhood scarred for the lack of a good index.

The truth is slightly different, my route to indexing has been long and winding, and for ‘young child’ read ‘6 foot 4 inch writer in his thirties’.

I have always been envious of those people who, from an early age, knew exactly what they wanted to be: vet, engine driver, teacher. (In infant school I liked the idea of being a teacher – I thought they got to keep all the dinner money.) I didn’t know what I wanted to be, but all my previous positions have included qualities essential for indexing – accuracy, attention to detail, an analytical brain, methodical working, meeting deadlines – and so I eventually evolved into an indexer.

My first job was as a junior in a branch of Martins Bank, pre-decimal and pre-computer. Accounts were handwritten in heavy ledgers with long columns of pounds, shillings and pence; the only computers we had were our brains. We had to stay until everything balanced, so accuracy, attention to detail and methodical working were essential if we wanted to go home! Pride in a job well done and tea-making skills were also learnt from my five years in banking.

A career break while raising a family and studying for an Open University degree honed my time management skills. I became expert in the art of meeting deadlines – taking the children in one direction and elderly parents in another for appointments, meetings, activities, and still finding time to ‘compare, contrast and discuss’ for my next 3,000 word assignment.

Books have always been my passion, and my return to work was in a small local library where the Dewey decimal system reigned supreme. In that far-from-busy place the only thing to pass the time was the checking and rechecking of the shelves where my alphanumeric skills came to the fore. I also learnt that I didn’t want a quiet, boring, not-a-lot-to-do job – I needed mental stimulation.

From there I joined a small up-and-coming firm importing textile dyes, where I was introduced to the brave new world of technology: computers, spreadsheets and telex machines – a long way from copperplate ledgers. The staff were few, the work was manic, and we turned our hands to everything, from accounts (my official position), to driving a fork truck, delivering goods and greeting Japanese visitors. It had variety, accuracy, deadlines and job satisfaction. The company expanded and relocated, but the fun and achievements have never been forgotten.

My next position introduced me to a very different world, that of academia at Manchester Metropolitan University. Once more, attention to detail and accuracy were of vital importance. As a secretary in Languages it wasn’t so much a case of dotting the ‘i’s and crossing the ‘t’s as making sure the cedillas and umlauts were all present and correct. Now I was working with academics whose job it was to impart knowledge with the aid of books – and those books were next to useless without a good index.

One Christmas break, having the luxury of time to read a magazine, I came across an article on indexing and finally found the career I knew was for me. I had, in the past, been irritated if a book had no index. I had also puzzled over long strings of locators (though not realizing they were ‘strings’ and ‘locators’), but it never once occurred to me that for a book to have an index someone actually has to sit down and create one.

Now I had discovered there was a group of people dedicated to this task, using all those skills I had steadily acquired over the last 30-plus years. That article was the turning point – here was the career I had been preparing for since my first day at work. The Society of Indexers training course, workshops and conference followed, and thus the bank junior finally became an Accredited Indexer.

Margaret Vaudrey is a freelance indexer, a member of the Family and Community Historical Research Society (FACHRS), and treasurer of the Family and Local History Indexing Group, and is currently working in the School of Design at Manchester Metropolitan University. Email: margaret@mv-index.wanadoo.co.uk

Note

1. www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/1019

References and further reading

