



Breaking into Indexing

The three major issues considered in this information sheet are:

- setting up a successful business
- the equipment you will need
- how to find work.

Finally, we will look at what you can do in those periods when you are ‘in limbo’ or between jobs.

In the experience of indexers there is sufficient indexing work around to enable you to get established. It might however take a bit of time for you to achieve this – so do not give up if over the initial months you are disappointed in the amount of work you are offered. Resilience is one of the qualities required of an indexer!

It is not advisable during the initial period to be entirely dependent upon income from indexing; it takes time to build up an adequate client base.

*When I started working as an indexer I still had a full-time job. This was quite tiring as it meant that I had to do my indexing work in the evenings and over the weekends (often using up my leave in order to complete an index within the deadline). After about a year I was getting enough indexing work to be able to change to part-time work – and just a couple of months later to start indexing full-time. Even so the first few months as a full-time indexer was an anxious period for me. Combining a job with indexing was exhausting, but it was worth it as it meant I did not need to panic about when the next commission would come in.**

In considering how to break into indexing we will be assuming you have completed one of the initial courses (see the Society’s *Indexing as a career*) and are now looking for advice about establishing yourself as a freelance indexer with regular work.

This booklet is written mainly from the perspective of finding work within the general field of humanities because it is this field, possibly more than any other, that presents difficulties. However the principles will apply to any speciality.

It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that if your specialism is history you should expect to find a number of established indexers working in this area. You might therefore need to consider one of the following:

- specializing further. For example if you are knowledgeable about military history you could advertise this as a specialist subject as well as history.
- diversifying. However, bear in mind that you should feel confident about tackling any book in the field of your choice. Avoid getting into a situation where you have to send proofs back because the book is ‘too difficult’ – this would not only be embarrassing for you but would also cause delay and inconvenience to the client.

I had a ‘lucky break’. I had just completed my degree in history when one of my tutors asked me to index his latest book. Although I have indexed three more history books for him, very little of my work has since been in this subject. I have been far more successful in finding work in other subjects such as sociology and economics.

* Excerpts in italics are from established indexers.

You need to find the balance between being overcautious, turning down work that you could have done, and being reckless, taking on work in a subject where you are not capable of producing a satisfactory index. In practice the line between being overcautious and being reckless can be fine. Producing an inadequate index will do your reputation a lot of harm. So it is better to err on the side of caution – but not too far!

A word of warning: if an editor offers you work in an unfamiliar subject, it is best to say so unless you are confident that you can handle it. However, it is not unknown for an editor to reassure an indexer that the book is straightforward and should not present any problems, only for the indexer to discover once the proofs arrive that it is far more complicated than expected.

An editor rang up and offered me a book on climate change. I said that climate was not one of my subjects, but finally agreed to take on the book when I was reassured that the book was only an introduction to the subject. When the proofs arrived I noticed the first line of the Introduction which said: 'This book assumes that the reader has a thorough knowledge of the subject'. I immediately got back to the editor concerned who chuckled and said: 'Well, by the time you have finished this book you will have another subject you can work in'. It was really tough and the book took me much longer to index than the budget warranted. However the editor proved to be right in the sense that I have since got more work in that subject.

Indexers in more technical subjects such as medicine and law tend to find it easier to get work and stick to their one specialist area. For more information about these subjects see the Society's *Occasional papers on indexing* series or contact the relevant Special Interest Group.

■ GETTING ESTABLISHED

For more information, refer to the Society's *Running a freelance business*.

As well as being a good indexer, a freelancer also needs to be competent in running a business. If you have not been self-employed before you will probably need some advice and guidance.

Courses

Consider going on a course, as one of our members advises:

Go on a free business course – these are organized by Training and Enterprise Councils (Business Links in Scotland) around the country. These courses can give you the confidence to produce your own advertising material.*

And another member:

I was accepted by Oxford University Press on their list of freelancers, possibly partly because I was already proofreading for them. They rang to offer a 1000-page book on Mahler. I had previously contacted the Society of Indexers to ask for advice on getting work. I had five phone calls in the week, of which the OUP call was one. A case of 'networking' possibly. A local free business course had given me confidence to market myself with a letter and brochure.

Books

There are several books giving advice on starting up as self-employed. New books on the subject are continually being produced. It is worth while having a look through some of them, although most are largely concerned with buying and selling.

* All areas have national and local support services for small businesses. Your local library will have information about these.

There is also free literature available. Many banks have booklets giving advice on running small businesses, some of which are very helpful. The Inland Revenue also has helpful literature on the subject.

Accountant

Consider going to an accountant for advice. Although you might be tempted to reject this as an unnecessary expense – and many indexers do not use accountants – a good accountant could give you valuable advice, and not only about what you can claim against tax. You could use an accountant for a couple of years and then do your own tax returns when you feel more confident. If you decide to use an accountant, find a good one – preferably by recommendation.

I found the cost of an accountant was less than I expected. She not only gave advice about what I could claim as expenses, but also gave general advice about running my business. Money well spent in my opinion.

Other indexers

Talk to other self-employed people about their experiences, and particularly to other indexers who are often very willing to help. But be sensitive to the possibility that the indexer you contact might be busy.

If you participate in the activities of the Society you should soon get to know other indexers.

■ EQUIPMENT

You need to consider carefully what you spend your money on. During the initial period there is quite a difficult balance to strike between, on the one hand, spending needlessly and, on the other, buying equipment that is not up to the job (or not buying essential equipment). It is possible that in the first year your income may not exceed the money you have laid out on equipment and advertising. If this is the case, do not despair; in the second year your expenditure should be lower and your income higher.

Some of these decisions will be influenced by how much work you are getting and of course your own financial situation: are you single, do you have dependents to support, do you have another source of income?

Computer

This is an essential part of your equipment. It is also probably the most expensive initial outlay you will need to make. Any standard new computer should be more than adequate.

Printer

Laser printers are more expensive than inkjet printers, but many indexers find the extra expense is well worth while. The running costs of a laser printer are substantially less than for an inkjet printer and the quality of print is far superior. Furthermore laser printers are much faster.

Another reason why a laser printer is a better buy is that publishers are beginning to send work in PDF format by email rather than in hard copy as they have traditionally done. This means that the indexer needs a substantial printer that works rapidly, in order to print out the whole book. If the proofs are sent to you by email, you should charge for the extra time and materials involved in printing the book out.

Internet/email

It is now essential for new indexers to have access to email facilities.

An ever-increasing number of publishers will accept completed indexes sent in as email attachments – invaluable for tight deadlines. It is also very useful to be able to correspond with editors by email.

Email allows you to get advice from fellow indexers on email discussion lists such as Index-L and the Society's Sideline; Macrex, Cindex and SkyIndex have their own email discussion lists. These are very valuable resources for new and experienced indexers alike. A lot of correspondence between indexers is now done by email as it is so convenient and quick.

Access to the internet is also very important as a reference source. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for example has an invaluable, free website and there are many other sites that indexers regularly use. While the internet cannot replace the necessity of having good reference books, it is an invaluable addition.

You could also consider having your own website (see below).

Telephone

An answering machine is essential. You can either buy a separate machine or use the answering facility offered by some telephone companies. The latter has the advantage that it switches automatically over to a message if you do not answer within a set time or if your telephone is engaged. Editors may leave a message if you are out but will not wait indefinitely for you to call back. If you have a mobile it would be worth mentioning your mobile number on the message.

A fax is not essential. It can, however, be useful – for example, if you discover a page missing in the proofs the editor can fax you the missing page.

Software

Most indexers use one of the dedicated software products, the three main ones at present (2002) being Macrex (www.macrex.com), Cindex (www.indexres.com) and SKY Index (www.sky-software.com). You can download demonstration versions of all of these. Indexing software is available for Macintosh and IBM-compatible PCs, although not all programs are available for both platforms. Software manufacturers' websites will give more specific advice.

In addition, it is advisable to have a reputable word processor.

Headed letters and business cards

Put some thought into these. We live in a world that is visually very sophisticated.

Business cards commercially produced, designed by yourself, should not be very expensive. If you put some time and thought into it and manage to produce a distinctive card this can present a very valuable image for you. Commercial printing firms should have a selection of cards from other businesses. Look through them and pick out which ones impress you. If design is not your strong point, get help.

One of the problems with business cards is that the unit price falls dramatically the more you have printed. Make a realistic assessment of how many you need and do not be tempted to order more than that number. It is likely that one or more of the details on the card, for example your telephone number or email address, will change within a year or two. You do not want to end up with a large number of out-of-date cards!

A letterhead need not cost you anything if you set one up on your computer. But, again, make sure it looks professional.

Use a good-quality printer for your initial letters to publishers. If you do not have a laser printer, consider getting your letter printed at a local internet café.

FINDING WORK

In this section we will consider the most effective way of advertising and of targeting editors. We will also consider the importance of networking. And finally we will look at that elusive 'lucky break'.

Letters/email

This is almost certainly the way you will find most of your work in the initial period.

Some editors have indicated that they welcome initial approaches through email. In fact one editor has even said that he only read emails and threw letters into the wastebin!

Finding email addresses is a bit more difficult than postal addresses, but if you go to a publisher's website and ask the postmaster of the site, they will let you have the email address of any individual within the company; you will however have to do some detective work to find the names of the editors relevant for your subject.

I often make initial contact with publishers via email. I use a version of my marketing letter tailored to the individual publisher. It's important to send the letter in the body of the email message itself and not to send any attachments unless specifically asked. I've found this gives a much quicker response than speculative letters sent via snail-mail.

It is recommended that you use both letters and emails – perhaps initially using the one method and then changing to the other if you get no response.

You should of course start by writing to the major publishers in your field. As it is your specialist field, you will probably know who these publishers are. However, you can find the major publishers in most fields in the two following ways:

- Consulting the *Writers' and artists' yearbook* or *The writer's handbook*
- Browsing in a bookshop – a glance at the relevant section will tell you which are the most important publishers in the subject.

Do not have a standard letter for all publishers. Generally circulars go in the bin unread (we all do it). So make sure your letter does not read like a circular.

- While you will probably have a standard format for your letters and CV, each letter should be specifically directed at the publisher you are writing to.
- Do not mention your indexing expertise in subjects that are irrelevant to the publisher (a publisher that specializes in political books does not want to know that you have just indexed a book on particle physics).
- Mention the publisher's name in the body of the text.
- Possibly say why you are looking for work from this particular publisher ('... as you are the leading publisher in this field I am particularly keen to work for you. . .').
- Try to get the names of editors so you can address letters personally to them.
- If you do not get a reply to your letter there is no harm in writing again. This time you could refer to your last letter and say you are still very keen to get work from them.
- A number of indexers have found that sending a stamped addressed envelope dramatically increased their chance of getting a reply.
- Editors get numerous letters from proofreaders, so your letterhead should make it clear that you are an indexer.

Last but not least: get somebody else to check your letter. No matter how meticulous you have been, it is easy to overlook a small but important mistake – one that somebody coming fresh to your letter would spot.

Below are ways in which some of our members first found work:

Response to my first 'spec' letters.

Obtained as a result of a speculative letter, sent after completion of the BIPT course.

After being made redundant, I sent off 50 letters to the first 50 names in Writers' and Artists' Yearbook and got three commissions. Never looked back.

In the late 70s I wrote to two publishers, having almost completed the RRC course, and was fortunate to receive two commissions by return – obviously there was a need I could fill. I haven't stopped since!

- 1. Researched Directory of Publishers for houses that published in my specialities (defence, military, nautical, aviation, transport, South Atlantic).*
- 2. Sent A4 letter to all (approx. 100) offering indexing services. Merged the letter but changed the subject area to suit publisher.*
- 3. Waited.*
- 4. Waited . . .*
- 5. Waited . . .*
- 6. Bingo! Rung by a well-known publisher of biographies: 'Do I do nautical?' 'Yes.' 'Please do our major biography of this year. Proofs coming tomorrow. Turn round in 10 days!' '(Gulp) – OK.' 'How much?' 'I will tell you when I've seen proofs.' (Eventually received £285 for 285 pages – as I am just starting.)*
- 7. From that others followed: repeat orders and referrals.*

CVs

- CVs need to be well presented. Take some time over the layout and design.
- Do not ramble. Give only relevant qualifications and areas of expertise together with details of indexing experience.
- CVs should preferably be no longer than a page as busy editors will not want to read more than that. However, do not make the page too crowded. Include contact details, as the CV might become separated from your covering letter.
- Again, do get somebody to check over your CV – ask them to check the design, spelling and grammar, and the content to see that all the pertinent information is included.
- A website can be a valuable complement to your CV.

Websites

The advantage of having your own website is that it enables you to give enquirers much more information about yourself and your experience than you will be able to put in *Indexers available* on the Society's website. Moreover you can have a direct link from your details on *Indexers available* to your own site.

Setting up your own website might however cost you more than you anticipate. There is no such thing as a free website – apart from the time involved in learning how to design a website, there is the cost of the software and other not so obvious costs. For example:

- If you are setting up a website for the first time the chances are that you will encounter some problems. If you are with one of the free internet service providers it will probably take a lengthy phone call to sort out problems – which you will be paying for at premium rates.
- You may need to purchase software, such as FrontPage, with which to create or amend your site.

- You will probably need to buy software in order to upload your files on to your website (FTP).

It might well be worth while paying somebody to design a website for you. Find someone who will offer a full service. A website designer should be able to:

- design a professional-looking site that does not take too long to load on to the screen
- ensure your website works well with both Netscape and Explorer
- include well-thought-out metatags – these enable enquirers to find your site through one of the search engines
- recommend FTP software that is easy to use, set it up and show you how to use it
- register your site with the major search engines
- show you how to do basic updates to your site so you do not have to pay somebody each time. Amending your site is very simple, so it is not worth paying somebody to do regular updates.

Finding a website designer

- Before commissioning somebody to design a website for you, ensure you like their work. You should start by looking at the designer's own website; also the designer should have a demonstration site on CD.
- If you come across a site you like on the internet, you might be able to find the name of the designer by looking at the source information of that site. The owner of the site if asked would hopefully give you the designer's email address.
- In order to view the source information go, for example, to the Society's website. At the top of your screen select 'view' and then 'source'. You will then be able to see who has designed the Society's site.
- If a designer gives you addresses of sites he or she has designed, look for the designer's name on these sites: do not be conned!

Specialist journals

Advertising in specialist journals is something to be wary about. It can be very expensive and there is little evidence as to its effectiveness; on the other hand, small ads are not very expensive and worth considering. One point to bear in mind with all advertising is that just one positive response could prove to be invaluable to you. It is advisable to discuss with other indexers in your specialist field before laying out money on such advertisements.

Availability

You will not always be available at the end of the phone when an editor tries to contact you. However, if the editor does leave a message for you, return the call as soon as possible. A matter of minutes can make a difference between your getting the job, and somebody else getting it.

Also bear in mind that there are certain times that editors are desperate to find an indexer, and therefore prepared to try a someone new. This particularly happens during the summer holidays and the Christmas period when many established indexers are unavailable. Friday afternoons also seem to be another 'window of opportunity' for new indexers; it would appear that editors want to find an indexer before the weekend so they do not have to come back to that particular task on the Monday morning. It has been even known for editors to ring up on Friday evenings, desperate to find an indexer!

Society of Indexers

If you are an active member of the Society you will come into contact with a number of other indexers. Once you become known, there is the possibility that the established indexers with

more work than they can cope with will be willing to pass work on. This is far more likely to happen if you are actively involved.

Apart from the annual conferences, there are local conferences and special interest groups. In addition you could become known by contributing to one of the online discussion groups (such as SIdeline or Index-L).

Indexers available

- The most important form of advertising apart from sending letters and emails is getting listed in *Indexers available*, which appears both in printed form and on the Society's website. It is sent in printed form to all the major publishing companies.
- As an Accredited Indexer (AI) you have two years when you can be listed in *Indexers available* before having to submit evidence of having completed two published indexes.
- Compose your entry with care; this requires the same attention as your first letter. Treat it as advertising.
- We are increasingly getting reports of indexers obtaining work from publishers who have read their details on the Society's website. This trend will almost certainly continue and is a good reason to get qualified as an Accredited Indexer as soon as possible – and to go on to get Registered.

Local group meetings and workshops

- You can find out about these from the Society's office in Sheffield. They are advertised on the Society's website (www.indexers.org.uk) and also normally in the Society's newsletter, *Sidelights*, deadlines permitting!
- These enable you to meet other indexers. Established indexers are much more likely to pass on work to people they have met.
- If you impress the workshop leader, he or she may well give your name to someone looking for an indexer in an emergency. Established indexers, when looking for some help, are likely to ask workshop leaders who they would recommend.
- If there is no local group in your area, start one. If the group is dormant, suggest a venue and date to the organizer.

Supervision scheme

This is an invaluable scheme as it enables you to get an assessment of the quality of your indexes. For details of this scheme see *Indexing as a career*.

My experience:

- 1. Took a course.*
- 2. Got into a mentoring scheme.*
- 3. The supervisor eventually trusted me with a complete book.*
- 4. The publisher (pleased with the book) was persuaded to give the next commission to the trainee.*

It worked for me and it should work for anyone!

Mentoring

Several local groups have informal mentoring systems. For information about these you should get in touch with the organizer in your area.

SIdeline

- Jobs appear from time to time on SIdeline. You need to reply to these immediately as they are normally taken very quickly.
- Contribute to the list by asking intelligent questions and contributing your own point of view. This will help you to get your name known by established indexers.

Registration

Get Registered and let the Registrar know about the unusual subjects you can deal with.

I joined the Society and attended an indexing course at the North London Polytechnic. Being a trained librarian from Australia (with possibly half the skills needed for indexing anyway), I applied for Registration. The subjects I claimed to be able to index included Philosophy and Classical Greek. Just at that time the Registrar was asked for someone to index a book on Greek Tragedy. There being no name suitable on the list, I was Registered and my name submitted to the publisher. I got the job and . . . it set me on the road to better things.

Roughly 6 months after qualifying an Accredited Indexer recommended me to Harper Collins for an urgent repagination job.

Related societies

Join related societies such as, for example, publishers' groups, local history groups or genealogical groups. Get it known that you are an indexer and available. A few of our members got their first work in this way.

By personal recommendation through being a member of Women in Publishing.

Joined local history group.

■ ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON APPROACHES TO FINDING WORK

- **Prepare a sample index.** Sending an editor a sample index enables the editor to judge the quality of your work. This method is often mentioned by US indexers but is not very common in the UK.
- **Make an index to a book without one.** Look in *The Indexer* for books without indexes. Alternatively choose a journal, one of a series of similar books, or one which is regularly updated. Send the index to the publisher offering your services and explain how an index could increase the value and saleability of the book. Don't be put off by an initial refusal.
- **Find a bad index and write to the publishers to explain how you could do it better.** Periodical indexes and annual publications are most appropriate for this approach. Take time to write a really exceptional letter.
- **Advertise on college/university noticeboards.**
- **'Cold call'.** In a survey of SI members no one said they used cold calling as a method of finding work, but many US indexers do get work in this way.

■ Success – lucky breaks and some other avenues

A golfer is reputed to have remarked about luck: 'The more I practise, the luckier I get'. In a similar vein Louis Pasteur commented that '... chance favours only the prepared mind.'

Some of our members got started as a result of a lucky break. You can make the possibility of getting a lucky break more likely. If you send that letter in to the publisher it might just arrive on their desk at the very moment they are desperately looking for an indexer. If you have taken the trouble to find out the editor's name, have taken care over the contents of the letter – then the lucky break is even more likely to happen. If you time the letter so it arrives in the middle of the summer holidays (when a number of established indexers are on holiday) that lucky break is still more likely to happen. On the other hand, if you just sit and wait for the work to come in . . . you are more likely to win the National Lottery jackpot than you are to get work.

It is also important to be in a position to be able to profit from a lucky break. So if you are offered work, sound keen – otherwise the editor might well change their mind!

Be available. Take the bull by the horns. If you're offered anything at all, say yes unless you are absolutely sure you can't do the work.

A few examples of how some of our members found their initial work follow:

Initiative and wit

I wrote to Gardeners' Chronicle magazine complaining about their index (6-monthly), giving examples of the stupidities that appeared. It was quite a long letter, but after only a week or so I had a reply inviting me to go to the office and discuss the index – I had said in my letter that I would be happy to take on the job. When they met me they told me they had been so amused by my letter that it had been passed around the office.

I got the job. As a result my name was passed on to other editors and authors.

I was working as a secretary for a social sciences publishing company. Someone brought in a scruffy piece of paper which, I was told, was an index. When I remarked that I was unimpressed, the editor suggested that I have a go myself. (This was about 30 years ago, long before I heard of the Society.)

Contacts

Below are a number of examples of indexers who started their career thanks to help from a contact (friend or colleague). If you are not lucky enough to have a contact who can help, do not despair as many indexers become established without such contacts. However, make use of friends or colleagues if you can.

I telephoned people I already knew in the two main law publishing companies. The rest is 'history' – they haven't found me out yet!

In the mid-70s I was one of an editorial team of four people producing a weekly art and antiques magazine. The proprietor decided that the magazine, which had been coming out for seven years, needed an index and, as the most junior member of the team, I was instructed to compile it.

I had never done an index before and had no preconceived ideas. I decided to start with broad classifications: painting, sculpture, ceramics, etc. Under these broad headings I listed the articles (in date order) with the contributors' names in brackets, followed by a reference to the issue and page number. The articles were listed by subjects rather than the often jokey headlines we devised (two that I was particularly proud of were 'Apostle spoons cause a stir' and 'Vermeer to eternity') as I realized these were not appropriate index entries. There were no entries under contributors' names and no cross-references. It was a very basic and unsophisticated index, but my boss seemed quite happy with it. I was not paid for this index as I worked on it during my normal working hours. I enjoyed the job and this encouraged me to look for other indexing work and eventually to think in terms of a career in indexing.

As I was finishing the training course I renewed acquaintance (at a birthday party) with the wife of an old university friend. She had been in at the beginning of the establishment of a successful publishing company. I later wrote to her, then sent her more details of my subject interests and samples of voluntary indexes I had done. She then passed on my name to the editors, and my first two commissions were for them. The Old Boy network . . .

In 1979 I was working as a proofreader for the publishing section of the Institute of Public Administration in Dublin. They needed an index in an emergency and asked me to give it a go. I found I quite enjoyed doing it (though I don't think I could look at it now) and decided to train. I did the Rapid Results College Course, passed it, and have never looked back.

From author colleague at work.

Working as an abstractor and indexer in-house led to a commission from a friend of one of the other people working there.

1982. I met the widow of an author whose book had much impressed me. She gave me the name of the small publisher, Neville Spearman, who commissioned my first index – My life with hunting-birds by a Hungarian falconer with the unpronounceable name of Laurent de Bastyai. It was fascinating – I was hooked! (How did I do it? Cards and Collison's book, very slowly. Spearman was delighted and I was paid.)

My first commission was passed on to me by another indexer who lived near to me at the time.

Asked by my boss (Head of Dept of Statistics), I being Research Assistant in Statistics.

1970. 'Rescuing' a badly prepared index, which in effect meant starting again. The index was for a book written by a fellow archaeologist (we were students together) and published by a local publisher, Adams & Dart of Bath. This led to a further commission from the publisher. I had no professional training but learnt 'on the job'.

My husband was working for a senior physician who had to edit some conference proceedings which needed an index, and he managed to get me the job. Subsequently I worked on medical conference proceedings for several years.

Lateral thinking

Reinterpreting an advertisement to advantage:

My first commission was from Longman, 1979: I replied to an advertisement for in-house staff that involved copyediting and indexing, making it clear that it was freelance work I was seeking. Several months later they came back to me with an offer (The Labour Party, paperback).

■ IN LIMBO – WAITING FOR WORK, OR WAITING FOR MORE WORK

- **Keep your skills up to date.** Index an unindexed book or journal; study indexes – keep working on improving your indexing. Do a supervised index (you could include this in your CV)
- **Prepare what you will say** to clients when they ring up. Keep a list next to the phone of questions that you will need to ask.
- Send **follow-up letters**. Some members also advise following up a letter with a **phone call** (it is important to have the name of an editor).
- **Familiarize yourself with your computer.** Learn all about your indexing software, word processing software, email and attachments.
- **Join the online indexing lists** (Sideline, Index-L, specialist software groups, etc.).

- **Be competent, be reliable, be available – and don't give up!**