Building an Indexing Career

Statistics and information from the survey conducted by the Society of Indexers in September 2010

Data analysed by Helen Bilton November 2010

Key points

- 50 people responded out of a potential 80 who had achieved accreditation in the previous five years.

- 68% of recently qualified indexers work part-time; 42% combine indexing with other paid work.

- 1 in 5 respondents work less than 20 hours a week in total – although not necessarily intentionally.

- 50% of respondents told us that they plan holidays in advance even if it means turning down work.

- 70% of respondents would like more work and workflow is typically variable rather than steady.

- Typically it can take up to two years to get established although half of the respondents had achieved their first job within three months.

- About a third had begun by combining indexing with paid employment and felt that the top advantages were security, two income streams and being able to 'try out' indexing. The top disadvantages were domestic/family tasks being neglected, lack of free time and stress.

- With regard to marketing ,it would seem that a new indexer's efforts would be best concentrated on direct/e- marketing, an Indexers Available entry and building up relationships with other SI members.

- Subject specialisms came out as important, with most respondents getting work in their specialist areas. Opinion on whether to accept work outside your specialisms was divided 50:50.

- With regard to setting up a business, the resources provided by the Society of Indexers were by far the most useful according to the respondents, more so than HMRC or Business Link, for example.

- Top of the list of essential equipment (computer assumed) were broadband connection and indexing software, followed by a desk and chair. Bottom of the list were items such as timekeeping and accountancy software.

- Finally, the advice to other new indexers emphasized the importance of patience, persistence, professionalism and personal contacts.

1. Response rate

Number of responses = 50

This is an excellent response rate out of the 80 eligible members who were emailed and asked to take part in the survey (eligibility being defined by having gained Accredited status within the previous five years). However, we do not know anything about the 30 non-responders who could, for all we know, be struggling badly or have given up.

2. How long since Accreditation?

58% of survey respondents had been an Accredited Indexer for two years or less and a quarter had held the status for less than a year. 18% had five years' experience, the maximum allowable for inclusion in the study group.

3. Full time or part time, and combining with other jobs?

Most of the indexers in the survey work part-time (68%) and over half of all respondents (52%) combine part-time indexing work with other functions – 42% of all respondents combine indexing with other paid work (mainly freelance) and 28% with household/caring duties (18% with both other work *and* caring duties). However, 28% of respondents said they work, or are available to work, full time. Nobody combines full-time employment with indexing work, although one respondent is in full-time employment and currently doing no indexing, and later questions reveal that people have done it in the past.

4. How much time spent on indexing (per week)?

Less than 10 hours	28%
10–20 hours	18%
20–30 hours	24%
30–40 hours	24%
More than 40 hours	0%
Not applicable (not currently working as an indexer)	6%

We also asked how long respondents spent on their other work. Of the people who combine part-time indexing with other paid work, 46% spend roughly the same time on each, 38% do more indexing than other work and the remainder do more other work than indexing.

5. How part-time can indexing/ freelancing be?

The survey shows that at least 20% of respondents work 20 hours or less in total, even when taking into consideration their other work. And there are a wide variety of combinations of indexing and other paid work. However, it is not clear how much of this is intentional and whether people would like to be working more.

6. Arranging holidays

50% of respondents told us that they plan holidays in advance even if it means turning down work. Many indexers have school-age children so we asked about school holidays; only three respondents said they always keep school holidays free, whereas 8 (16%) said they would *like* to keep holidays free but find they can't afford to turn down the work. Seven respondents (14%) said they take short-notice holidays when they have a quiet period.

7. Are newly qualified indexers generally satisfied with the amount of work they are getting?

Our survey shows that 70% of respondents would like more work than they are currently getting and that their workflow is variable rather than steady (59%). The results are even more interesting when we look at those who have qualified within the last two years, with 100% of them saying they are not getting enough work and would like more, whereas with more established indexers it is more like 50:50. Half of the more established indexers say they have a steady flow of work, whereas 95% of more recent accredited say they don't. This strongly corroborates the findings of section 8, that it takes a good year or two to become established.

8. How long to become established?

Almost a third of respondents (28%) said that they did not yet consider themselves to have established an indexing career. Of these, all but one were within two years of Accreditation.

Of the remainder, 77% said that they had established their career in less than two years, with 56% saying they had done so in less than a year.

9. How long between finishing course and first job?

About half (48%) of respondents had achieved their first commission within three months, with 22% managing it within a month. Of those who took longer, only two took more than a year. There was no space in the question to cover this, but in the free-text comments it is clear that some people took on work before gaining accredited status as well.

 10. Combining indexing with employment

Many indexers do the course and start working whilst still in (full- or part-time) employment. 18 respondents (36%) had done so and they listed the following problems:

Domestic/family tasks neglected	44%
Lack of social life/free time	39%
Stress (general)	33%
Lack of sleep	28%
No problems	22%
Difficult to meet indexing deadlines	17%
Difficult to meet employment deadlines	6%

and the advantages:

Security	83%
Having two sources of income	67%
Able to try out indexing without abandoning old career	61%
Maintaining contact with colleagues	39%
Networking opportunities leading to indexing work	44%
No advantages	0%

We asked about how long people continued this work pattern and what the balance was and received a wide variety of answers, showing that people create their own individual situations to suit their circumstances.

11. Marketing approaches

The table below shows the types of marketing undertaken by our respondents:

Indexers Available	94%
Direct marketing (mail)	74%
E-marketing	50%
Recommendations from clients	42%
Work passed on by other SI members	34%
Other SI members recommending me to clients	30%
Own website	30%
Other (Please Specify)	16%
Telephone marketing	12%
Not applicable (have not done any marketing)	0%

Under 'other', respondents said that they had received recommendations from non-SI indexers, networked at subject specialist conferences, used personal connections from employment, friends or other sources of freelance work, or answered requests posted on SIdeline.

The following table shows the comparative 'success rates' of different types of marketing and reveals the most effective source of work to be repeat business, followed by direct marketing, recommendations from other members and Indexers Available. Under 'other' for this question, people said through friends/ other contacts, through SIdeline, or that they couldn't pick just one.

Marketing method	Most effective	Have had at least one commission from
Repeat business from clients	24%	not asked
Direct marketing (mail)	16%	46%
Other SI members recommending me to clients	14%	28%
Indexers Available	10%	62%
E-marketing	10%	38%
Other (Please Specify)	10%	16%
Recommendations from clients	4%	34%
Work passed on by other SI members	2%	34%

Own website	2%	8%
Telephone marketing	0%	0%

The conclusion to draw from this is that marketing is effective and that a wide range of approaches can be productive, but that repeat business is very important; it is crucial to make sure you do a good job in order to get that repeat business (see also comments section, below).

It would seem, from the results of this survey, that a new indexer's efforts would be best concentrated on direct/e- marketing, an Indexers Available entry and building up relationships with other SI members. Conversely, telephone marketing and having one's own website would appear to be less profitable (though having your own website may be considered a vital part of e-marketing).

12. Who did respondents contact?

Large publishers	74%
Publishers in my specialist subject area(s)	74%
Small publishers	70%
Previous contacts/acquaintances	48%
Publishers recommended by other SI members	20%
Authors	16%
Not applicable (have not approached anyone)	16%
Local universities	14%
Other (Please Specify)	0%

13. Subject specialisms

The overall consensus is that respondents agreed that they started out emphasizing their specialist subjects rather than their indexing skills. When it comes to the balance of work, more indexers started out doing both general and specialist works than one or the other (i.e. they took pretty much whatever was offered) and now tend to do either general and specialist or more specialist (i.e. not many people only/mainly work on general texts). Only a quarter of respondents say they never get work in their specialist areas and over half say they've developed new specialisms as a result of the work they've been offered. On the topic of whether or not they accept work in a subject area they are unfamiliar with, respondents are split exactly 50:50!

For new indexers, therefore, this section strongly indicates that developing subject specialisms is important.

14. Sources of help for setting up your indexing business

Source	"Useful" (very + quite responses)	Very useful	Did not use at all
Unit D of the SI course(3rd edn)	88%	28%	4%
SI website	80%	32%	14%
SIdeline	74%	30%	12%
HMRC website	46%	10%	38%
Advice from members of my local group	46%	20%	54%
HMRC advisers/helpline	22%	10%	68%

Business Link courses/advisers/helpline	14%	4%	74%
Business Link website	10%	4%	74%

This shows that SI resources are well at the top of the list.

We asked a free-text question about any other sources and here respondents stressed personal contacts (e.g. other freelancers) and many mentioned advice gained at the SI conference and workshops.

15. Essential equipment

The following list ranks* what our respondents think of as the most important equipment. A computer is a given, as the top two are computer-dependent, although clearly there is no consensus over desktop v laptop.

Broadband connection	95%
Indexing software	91%
Office chair	85%
Office desk	83%
Desktop computer	78%
Laptop computer	73%
Separate room to use as office	72%
Laser printer (mono)	61%
Answerphone/answering service	58%
Highlighters	55%
Dedicated office space within room used for other purposes	53%
Inkjet printer (colour)	52%
Mobile phone	49%
Book rest/document holder	46%
Scanner	33%
Extra monitor	31%
Accountant	25%
Timekeeping software	20%
Accounting software	18%

Under 'other' several people recommended pdf software (not just Acrobat Reader but something to merge or edit pdf documents) and office software such as Word. Other suggestions are back-up software/ disks, indexing reference books, good lighting and the EyeLevel Reading Ruler.

*ranking was done by scoring 3 points for 'essential', 2 for 'useful' and 1 for 'handy' and creating a % of the total maximum score.

16. Advice for other new indexers

Finally, we asked people for their advice for other indexers. Here are their comments verbatim, but to summarise they stress the importance of patience, persistence, professionalism and personal contacts.

> *Don't give up. Keep sending out those marketing letters. Go to SI conferences and join your local group. Keep up with personal development (in indexing, in running a small business,*

and in your specialist subjects). Don't give up the day job until you get a few regular clients (i.e., don't put all your eggs in one basket).

Be professional and reliable at all times, meet deadlines, always be helpful and pleasant with clients. Try not to make mistakes, but if/when you do make sure you learn by them.

Think very carefully before pursuing a career in indexing, then keep putting yourself out there.

Have record-keeping forms and materials (eg commission record, financial spreadsheet, telephone enquiry checklist etc) prepared before starting marketing campaign.... also an up-to-date personal CV to send to potential clients.

My indexing career at present is providing a second income. As the first commission takes time to generate and regular work coming in, have stable finances to support you. Persist in marketing, many publishers don't reply, which is disheartening but somebody will give you a break.

Start in the summer holiday months when other indexers go on holiday and publishers are desperate enough to be willing to take a chance on a newcomer - it worked for me!

I got my first few commissions by accepting low rates - this enabled me to get a few titles under my belt so that I had something to put on my Indexers Available page right from the start.

Indexers Available has been vital to me - I was approached by a major client within weeks taking my page, and it still brings enquiries.

If you send off 100 letters, and only get a 1% success rate, you've still got your first commission. Also, don't underestimate the value of making contact with other indexers.

Keep plugging away at the marketing and experiment with different approaches.

Go to the conferences and get networking.

Not to give up the day job to do it full-time.

Never underestimate the time the first few indexes will take

Find out which publishers/distributors publish books in your specialist area (Writers and Artists Yearbook is handy). Look them up on the Web. It may be a good idea to phone up to get the name of the person who commissions indexes. Email all of them (don't bother with snail mail as it's a waste of money that you haven't got). If you don't know the name or department ask in the email if your message can be forwarded to the correct person. Having a website or just a single web page is quite a good idea as you can refer clients to it for more information about yourself. It's also good practice to teach yourself web design as HTML could come in useful if you want to index websites in the future.

Have patience.

Send out lots of emails and letters (but choose which publishers/organisations carefully).

Don't leave paid work until established, don't expect SoI minimum rates, don't take on material you may not adequately comprehend, but don't be too narrow in your specialisms. Although I'm on several publishers' lists now, I've never obtained work this way (authors have approached me, but been put off by my fees, even though they are below or equivalent to SoI minimum rates, and despite on the whole being for quite complex texts), instead my contracts have been almost all through clients' recommendations, so personal contacts with authors are very helpful if you can establish them early on.

Get maximum benefit from SIdeline and Indexers Available (attention to your IA entry will pay dividends). If you have real specialist experience (e.g. in law or medicine), market yourself directly to publishers in that area. Email can be as effective as snail mail, so long as you are able to identify the right people (typically "production editors"). If you can't identify the names of these people, try emails to commissioning editors in the right field asking them to forward the mail to the relevant person.

Patience and perseverance

Don't do it - it's a shrinking industry.

Be familiar with indexing software before taking on first assignment.

Harden your heart and say 'No' to work you don't want.

Always adopt a professional approach when dealing with potential clients. Research carefully any potential opportunities that arise so you can discuss the publisher's indexing needs with the confidence of someone who knows what their talking about even if it is your first or second index! Don't accept any old job, particularly one you are not able to complete due to inexperience and time constraints.

Don't expect too much too soon unless you are already have a good network of contacts within the publishing or academic sectors it will take a long time. If this is a complete career change then it seems to take a long time to find contacts and to get repeat business.

Don't get discouraged when at it difficult to find work initially. Be meticulous with your first index even if it takes more hours than you bill for. Once you have completed an index, update your CV and send out marketing letters or chase up people you have already contacted. Also build a strong relationship with that first client in order to receive repeat work.

Be positive - plenty of determination and don't get despondent. There is work out there. Also get your finances and admin in order - do your tax return on time.

Be patient

Join your local group

Be a part of a local group. Get to know people so they can help you and in turn you can help them. I think it is absolutely essential to be a part of a local group.

Develop good relations with clients.

Be honest about your abilities and say if you feel a subject is out of your field - sometimes they will find someone more suitable, sometimes they will assure you that a basic index is all they need.

Don't be annoyed if authors supply keywords, it is their book and such lists can be useful, especially if you are not familiar with the subject. If anything is unsuitable as an index heading, say so and explain why. Most editors are very reasonable and professional in their approach.

Don't take on more work that you can manage as it could result in a rushed or badly compiled index.

Don't leave you day job until you have at least three months' of living expenses in the bank.

Volunteer for something within the SI and attend the conference. In my first year after qualifying, having my name known within the Society gave me my first three publishers, referred on from colleagues. I'm sure that was what gave me a good start.

Patience, being active

Freelance self-employed means exactly that - you have to find your own work and keep finding it. Just because you have qualified the work will not fall into your lap and you are not owed a living, you will have to go out and get work. Client relationships are very important - be the sort of person who is quick to respond, easy to talk to, helpful and cooperative. If the publisher has to call someone and they have the choice of two numbers they will call the one they prefer to talk to!