

Indexing as a freelance career

Have you ever wished you could actually read the books in your library, rather than just order them, catalogue them or lend them out? And that you could be paid for doing so? This is what **Marian Aird**, former librarian turned freelance indexer now does, as she explains.



Marian Aird (www.marianaird.co.uk, marianaird@hotmail.com) is a professional freelance indexer, and is Marketing Director for the Society of Indexers. With an MA in Librarianship from Loughborough University, Marian previously worked as a music librarian at the BBC and Trinity College of Music.

MANY of us perhaps never give too much thought to the index – except when it's missing or inadequate. It's easy to forget, in this age of free text searching, that back-of-the-book indexes are compiled by real people who have read through the text in detail and identified or created suitable index entries. Why do we still need indexes, you may ask, when so much content, even books, are in electronic format and can surely be easily searched at the press of a button or touch of a screen?

Do we still need indexers?

The reality is, of course, that online searches cannot do the intellectual work indexers do, identifying concepts, sorting significant information from passing mentions, distinguishing between different people with the same or similar names, anticipating the reader's approach to the book, and choosing suitable entry points for different levels of reader.

Some of this may sound familiar, and it's true that many of the skills of the indexer can be found in librarianship too, in relation to the organisation of information and its accessibility. Additionally, indexers need to be able to read a text closely, understand the significant content quickly, have an eye for detail and be able to cope with tight deadlines.

Tools of the trade

I turned to indexing after several years out of the workplace when my children were young. I had been living in London and working in libraries, but in the meantime we had moved to rural France. Realising there was no possible work to be had here that used my particular skills and experience, I contacted the careers adviser at CILIP, who put me onto the Society of Indexers. I signed up to its distance learning training course straightaway. This gives an excellent introduction to indexing principles, current practice and standards, as well as offering support through an email helpline, a student discussion list and several online tutorials. The course can be taken at your own pace, and can take any time between nine months and four years. Once completed, you gain Accreditation, and become a Professional Member of the Society.

Finding work

Once I'd completed the course, the challenge was to find work. This is where the

freelancer needs to be very pro-active in approaching editors, creating a professional online presence, and using any contacts you may have had in previous careers. My first commission was from a former colleague who was publishing her PhD. I also made sure I attended the SI's annual conference, and got to know my fellow indexers, who will often want someone to recommend when they have more work than they can do. Otherwise it came down to targeting specific publishers whose subject field I felt competent to work in, and sending out emails offering my services. Many were ignored, but I gradually got a trickle of work that turned into a stream, and I now (after three years) turn down as much as I take on.

Flexibility

For me the benefits of indexing as a career are the flexibility, both in terms of working hours and geographical location, and the interesting books I get to read. My background is in the humanities, and I've indexed books on music and literature, religion, history and literary biography. But indexes are needed for books in all subject areas, so having expert knowledge in science, medicine, law or the arts will be equally useful.

If you think indexing might be for you, take a look at the 'Training in Indexing' page on the Society of Indexers' website (www.indexers.org.uk) and answer the questionnaire on your suitability and interests. You might find this is the perfect opportunity for you to go freelance, either to work around personal or family commitments, or as part of a 'portfolio' career that includes other freelance or part-time work. It will certainly allow you to avoid the daily commute, choose your working hours, and perhaps best of all, to read as much as you like! []



A freelancer's view: outside the window of my home office in France.

Further details

Society of Indexers

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