

Database indexing – sustaining quality

A brainstorming session hosted by the ACT Branches of the ALIA Health Libraries Section and the Australian Society of Indexers, National Library of Australia, 22 November 2000

Organising committee: Lynn Farkas, Sandra Henderson, Prue Deacon

There were 25 participants - indexers, cataloguers, database managers and indexing service providers - representing a wide range of databases.

A rough guide to the issues was distributed to initiate the discussion. Each participant then commented on issues pertinent to their own work. This has been collated as Comments from participants.

It was agreed that discussion would continue using the ALIA Indexers mailing list. The discussion will be open to all members of the list and will start in February 2001.

A rough guide to the issues

Prepared by Prue Deacon

The broad topic

- Subject indexing as part of database indexing, cataloguing or metadata creation.
- The trend to outsourcing of indexing and cataloguing.
- Looking beyond initial skills training courses to the period where expertise is developed through close on-the-job supervision.
- Effects on quality if expert training is neglected.

The players

- Database owners and managers; indexing service providers, indexers ...
- Who does the work? Who checks it? Who pays?

Indexer expertise development

- Who is responsible for developing expertise (ie the stage beyond basic competence) - how intensive should supervision be - how can supervision be achieved if the work is outsourced - what does it cost - who pays
- When expertise has been developed, how quickly can it be adapted to a different database
- Where do indexers come from - do they get channelled into indexing straight after tertiary training - do they have the opportunity for experience in other library or information areas - does it matter if they have no practical searching experience or interaction with searchers

Workload

- For specialty databases, the expert skills required are very specific - a combination of specialty indexing skills and subject knowledge
- At the same time, the total workload in Australia is very low - a particular database may need only 1 or 2 full-time-equivalent indexing staff
- The specialties may be too small to sustain a training program but passing expertise from one person to another is a fragile chain.

Quality and outsourcing

- When database owners outsource indexing, do they factor in quality assurance - do they actually assign staff time to monitor quality or just ignore the issue - by the time a drop in quality is noticed by users, it may be too late to fix it

Indexing rates

- Indexing rates are low compared with other professional contract work - can these rates cover expert training and quality assurance

Developing the profession and standards

- Indexing should not be a static discipline - standards and procedures need to be continually reviewed as technology changes - who should do this - should the work be paid or voluntary
- Ideally it would be a collaborative process involving all players, including searchers and users
- Indexing is often seen as a part-time/casual occupation - good for working from home, fitting in with young children - can indexers be motivated to volunteer for professional association activities, to participate in standards review etc
- For indexing service providers - how easy is it to collaborate when you are in competition

Comments from participants

Collated by Lynn Farkas

The following comments have been grouped to give a feel for the concerns and issues which arose from the Brainstorming Session.

Quality of indexing

- While there may be support in the indexing that is done within organisations, there is no interest outside our area about how *well* we index.
- Quality control is simply not being done.
- There is a lack of time for quality control.
- There is not much regard by others in the organisation about the amount of effort needed to maintain quality. In the past, resources have been a problem as soon as you moved outside the library environment. Within the Departmental mainstream, some jobs required library-type skills but you couldn't get staff who had these skills. Now with the Web, there is more of an acknowledgment of the need for information quality.
- Near enough is good enough.
- Indexers who work for contracting services can sometimes see a quality problem, but are not in a position to do anything about it.

Relationship of indexing to other information services

- From a reference viewpoint, no one ever gives a thought to the underlying structure of indexing. Can we reconcile this?
- Searchers don't take the time to learn indexing, or to provide feedback about problems they encounter to the database manager.
- We set up the most beautiful systems (eg thesaurus control) and people simply don't use them. Why not?
- With full-text material becoming more available through electronic journals and database document delivery, and keyword searching becoming more prevalent as an end-user option, is there still a need to index?

Issues affecting quality control

- Authority control is a problem, particularly when people are cobbling together thesauri.
- Everybody seems to be developing their own thesaurus for metadata for gateways and portals. Some standards exist (eg AGIFT thesaurus) but they are often too broad.
- Standards and guidelines about the indexing performed must be laid down initially by database providers. If this is not available, the client may have very different ideas about what they expect from the indexer, and this communication problem can affect quality control.
- Systems backups for the database are important for quality control, and as systems become more sophisticated quality control should be easier to maintain.
- A systems approach to fixing up data can be more cost effective than training for quality control. The trick is to find people who can write rules to cover all possible variations of the result you want to achieve, and then use programming to navigate through a database fixing it up.
- Clients (ie database providers or funders) may not inform the contractor or contract indexers if they have a problem with the quality of the index.
- Some indexes rely on only one or two indexers to provide all the data for a database. This is risky for continuity of quality, especially as people come towards retirement age, or if the indexing is contracted out.
- Mobility of staff can be a quality problem – people trained to index move on to other things.
- For specialist databases, indexers with appropriate subject skills can be difficult to find (or to afford!). It can take 2-3 months for a new indexer to feel comfortable/competent in the subject area. Quality control during this "settling in" period can suffer.

Training issues

- People entering indexing are generally better equipped to do so than in years past, because they are exposed to the basics in their formal coursework. Thus the need for general courses is not as great as the need to become adept at the requirements of a specific database, or use of a specific thesaurus.
- Who has responsibility for training indexers in the specifics of a database, the client or the contractor?
- With the increased use of outsourcing, Departments think the training option is no longer their responsibility.
- You learn by doing. Training doesn't help unless there is feedback.
- There is a lack of time for mentoring or individual training.
- From the indexers point of view, feedback training is important and quality control is needed, but no one has the time to do it (NB this becomes even more of an issue when an indexer is paid by the item under contract – who pays for the time spent in feedback or training?)
- It would still be useful for the Society of Indexers to run a general 1-day course a few times a year, as a refresher and introduction for new indexers.
- A development for the future could involve competency-based training packages being developed by the TAFE system nationally, but this hasn't started in this area yet.

The future

- How relevant will indexers/indexing be in the future? "I sometimes think we are like ants, ordering our world to the utmost degree and completely oblivious to the steamroller coming through."
- Indexers are perfectionists. Is it worth it/can they afford to be?
- The Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI) has created a registration subcommittee to investigate what would be the minimum standards for awarding the status of "registered indexer" to database indexers (as is now done with back-of-book indexers and is the main form of accreditation/recognition given by the Society). Sandra Henderson is the ACT representative on the Committee.

Results of the Brainstorming Session

It was agreed that 2 issues are of utmost concern:

1. There needs to be some agreed criteria for quality control, and processes for implementing and maintaining quality (eg standards, guidelines)
2. There is a need for continuing training in specialist areas of database indexing (eg use of particular systems as in the medical field with MeSH). An unresolved but important aspect of this is who should take responsibility for this training (eg Departments, database providers, contractors, educational bodies, professional indexing or cataloguing societies)

Other issues which arose included:

- The relationship between client and contractor, and how it affects quality.
- A need to evaluate the whole idea of indexing within the information retrieval spectrum (eg is it worth doing indexing?)

It was agreed that these issues should be considered, and that further discussion was needed to come up with some ideas about how to tackle them.