

Interview with Stephen Ingle, founder of ASI organizational member WordCo Indexing Services

edited by L. Pilar Wyman

This is the second in a series of interviews with representatives of ASI organizational members. The inaugural interview was with Karin Newton, Index Manager, Matthew Bender & Company, Inc., a member of the LexisNexis Group (see the October 2004 issue of this bulletin, pages 116-118).

Since 1988, **WordCo** has produced over 3,100 indexes in virtually every subject area for a long list of major and not-so-major publishers. Stephen Ingle, founder and owner of WordCo, manages a staff of trained indexers and oversees all aspects of production. He combines a broad liberal arts education (B.A. from Yale, Masters degrees in German and Russian studies) with four years of practical editing and proofreading experience at the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) in New York City. He has been a member of the American Society of Indexers since 1991 and WordCo has been an organizational member of ASI since 2005. His trained in-house staff focuses solely on indexing and handles hundreds of projects every year.

As many of our subscribers may be unfamiliar with your company, please give us an overview of your company and your affiliation with ASI.

WordCo Indexing Services began in 1988 as a part-time home-based business focusing on word processing and some

indexing. By 1991 the business became full-time, focusing solely on indexing. In 1991, I also joined ASI. In 1999, the business moved into a commercial office space in downtown Norwich, Connecticut. In 1994, I bought a small building in Norwich that was formerly a religious school to house WordCo and possibly to lease space to others. WordCo occupies 1500 square feet of the building and has seven employees. Currently, we index about 400 titles per year for various publishers. In 2005, WordCo joined ASI as an organizational member.

What subjects do you all work on?

We work on practically all subject areas, however we do avoid arcane subjects such as advanced economics, advanced physics, advanced medical, etc.

What are some of the challenges facing your company?

Challenges we currently face include:

- balancing the indexing business (WordCo) with rehabilitating the building and preparing for having a paying tenant;
- maintaining positive cash flow (the building is a money-pit, at least in the short term!);
- training part-time employees to become competent indexers while providing an attractive work environment;
- marketing to new and current clients and being able to handle increased workloads without burning out myself or my employees;
- monitoring and maintaining quality of the final indexing product that goes out of this office.



The WordCo Indexing Team, left-to-right: Gabrielle Aldrich, Barbara Holloway, Mary Ducat, Kathleen Barry-Shannon, Steve Ingle, Rosemary Jordal (seated), and Bill Morrison. Missing from photo: Marie Pelkey.

Interview

In broad strokes, how does indexing work get done at your company?

Over the years, we have developed in-house techniques for making the indexing process more efficient and organized from start to finish (mostly we learned the hard way, through our mistakes!).

Key to our record-keeping process is a separate cover sheet for each project, which contains information on client, book, author, arrival and due dates, special notes, etc. Relevant notes, emails, as well as a copy of the final invoice get attached to the cover sheet.

Also, we have a scheduling whiteboard ("the board") on which projects are listed.

We usually do not index books from beginning to end. Rather, we approach the index cyclically, looking first at the book's overall structure, then creating an outline ("skeleton") index of the entire book, and finally doing a third pass for picking up the rest of the relevant information ("details"). Finally, the index is edited, and after a quality-control process, is sent off to the client.

How have your indexing procedures changed over the last 5 years?

The actual indexing procedures have changed remarkably little. **While your indexing procedures may not have changed (and they do give me some food for thought about my own procedures, as I eye that master wall calendar above me), what about the tools you use? Has that changed at all? If so, how?**

We've tried to automate as much as possible. We've experimented with automatic indexing, which works OK with long, dense books (such as history) where highest quality is not required and cost is a factor.

Recordkeeping is not an indexing task per se, but is absolutely necessary if one is handling more than a couple of projects simultaneously. QuickBooks is very helpful in this regard. We still work from paper timesheets and project cover sheets, as well as a (physical) wall scheduling board, but we hope to improve on these in the next year or so. We are networked, but we need to upgrade to a dedicated server.

Actual indexing procedures have changed relatively little. We have reduced levels of mark-up of pages, since this is very time-consuming, but this can only be done when one is confident with the material and the book.

Within the largest definition of indexing, please tell us about the kinds of people who are doing that kind of work for your company.

They tend to be college-educated people who might be bored with "normal" jobs. While many people might find indexing "boring," indexers at WordCo generally enjoy learning about different subjects and enjoy being around each other. Several of our employees have other jobs/vocations such as jazz musician, artist, and florist.

What makes a great indexer for your company?

In my experience, the best indexers are highly educated people interested in learning, who are very detail-oriented yet can see the big picture. They often have areas of very specialized knowledge. They are committed to learning the ins and outs of indexing and becoming productive over a period of several years.

Any new areas of interest? Where do you see indexing taking you and your company?

As long as there are non-fiction books still being printed, we will have indexing work to do. We have not gotten very involved with embedded indexing, website indexing, etc., but that is a possibility.

Anything else you'd like to comment on? Please elaborate.

Indexing work can get very lonely after a while, even for shy, introverted people as we indexers tend to be! Having an office with multiple indexers has been a great experience for me and my employees. Occasionally we will go out together for lunch or even a "field trip" to a local site of interest. This and joking around seem to break up some of the inevitable monotony.

We're even thinking of getting an animal, maybe a cat. We're working on a theme song.

We take our work very seriously but that doesn't mean we can't kid around and have fun. ☺

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