

Volunteer Indexing Projects: Gaining Experience While Providing a Service In Your Community

by Debbie Olson

Introduction

A new indexer looking for general indexing experience. An experienced indexer looking to expand into a new format or subject area. Providing a community service. A volunteer indexing project provides real-world experience as it develops indexing, organizational, and professional communication skills and results in a work sample. Sharing a unique skill with a community organization that does not have the staffing, know-how, or funds to undertake such a project is also very rewarding. This article discusses how I initiated two such volunteer indexing projects.

Background

I have a master's degree in library and information studies and have taken both USDA indexing classes. I am interested in the role played by access (e.g. indexes) to community and public information, or from the standpoint of an organization efficiently managing and utilizing its own information as well as an ordinary citizen accessing public information.

Having completed several practice indexes and a few indexes for paying clients, I would like to continue building a solid foundation in indexing while further developing my organizational skills. Volunteer work has always been a part of my life so I naturally adapted this aspect to indexing.

My approach to completing a volunteer project is identical to that of completing a project for a paying client. While there are no official deadlines, I impose my own and develop goals and milestones when appropriate. I also keep a time and work log of the various aspects of the project such as indexing, editing, research, writing guidelines and creating name and subject authority lists, and other related managerial and organizational tasks that will assist me with planning and scheduling future projects.

Project #1: Neighborhood Study

For this project, I created an after-market index to a 100-page study undertaken for my neighborhood as an urban design project at a local university. I noticed the study on display at my branch library and contacted one of the professors serving as an advisor for the study and asked him if he would send me a copy, which he did, at no cost.

After looking through it I felt it would provide a good opportunity to practice my indexing skills as there were several maps, diagrams, names, and technical details. In addition to creating a useful tool and honing basic indexing skills, I would also learn more about my neighborhood after having just moved into the area.

Although I retained the copyright to the finished index I sent an email, as a courtesy, to the professor explaining my interest in wanting to donate a copy of it to my branch library. With his acknowledgement, I then wrote a letter to the branch library manager enclosing a copy of the index and noting the advising professor for the study knew I was donating my index. The index now resides with the library's copy of the study.

Project #2: Community Newsletter

Currently, I am working on creating an index to the monthly newsletter of a local peace and social justice organization in honor of their 70th anniversary. The project encompasses the seventy-year run of the newsletter that ranges from one page of typed text to the current format averaging 16-24 pages per issue with several illustrations and photographs. I have limited the scope of the project to the issues available on the organization's website.

I proposed the project to the organization before I began indexing and met with them to discuss how they would use the index. Based on our discussions, I began outlining indexing guidelines. I also contacted a few people I know locally who are interested in indexing

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and/or the subject matter and asked if they would like to serve as "on-call" volunteer reviewers or researchers. At this point, my contact with the organization is primarily to clarify organizational history or provide an occasional update as to the progress of the index.

While this is quite an extensive project, I am interested in peace and social justice issues and in learning more about such movements in my community and in gaining invaluable project management skills and subject area experience. When completed, the organization will not only have better access to the contents of its primary publication, but it will also have a tool that provides a snapshot of the issues covered and the growth it has achieved over the last seventy years.

Conclusion

In a profession that is primarily self-taught, volunteer projects offer a chance to apply newly-acquired skills or to adapt current skills to new formats or subject areas while at the same time promoting the importance of a professionally-created index. And while the term "community" encompasses a much broader view in today's increasingly connected world, focusing on projects in our geographical community can be a very rewarding experience as it provides us with an opportunity to assist local organizations in creating a tool to better manage internal information needs and provides more accessibility to community information. This ultimately benefits us not only as individual indexers, but also as active participants in both our geographical and professional communities. ☞