

Fourth national survey of editors

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The fourth national survey of editors was conducted at the conference, 'From Inspiration to Publication', held in Hobart in May 2007. There were 132 responses to the survey, an increase on the responses to the third national survey of editors, carried out in October 2005 at the Melbourne conference.

These surveys are the only comprehensive, national collection of information about editors. Although participation at national conferences is not necessarily representative of all editors, they are excellent opportunities to gather national data and views, and they provide a snapshot of the profession. To allow comparison over the four surveys, the same questions were asked, where possible.

As the conference was held in Hobart, there is a disproportionate representation of Tasmanian editors. Some 16% of respondents were from Tasmania. Even so, there is an encouraging continuity of response, which suggests that we can have confidence in the findings. The most variable responses are in the area of rates and charges so I conducted a state-by-state analysis to allow comparison.

Who is an Australian editor?

- It comes as no surprise that women continue to outnumber men in the profession, with 87% female respondents and 13% male.
- As all the previous surveys have shown, editors are highly educated. The percentage of editors who hold at least a degree remains steady at 92%. In 2005, just over a quarter of respondents held a Masters or Doctoral degree; in 2007, the number of higher degrees had increased to 36%. The combined percentage of people holding qualifications higher than an undergraduate degree is an impressive 63%. Many respondents reported multiple higher degrees, for example two Masters degrees or a Masters and a Doctorate.

- The proportion of editors who reported participating in professional development programs also increased slightly, to 97%, continuing the increasing trend for professional skills upgrading noted in previous surveys.
- The proportion of respondents who had more than 6 years' experience as an editor increased slightly, to 71%.
- The proportion of full-time editors was 54% compared with 60% two years earlier, with 28% working part time and 14% working in the field in addition to other employment.
- The changing role of editors in the publishing industry continues to be reflected in the terms we use to describe our work. In 2007, 31% of respondents described their role as copyediting or proofreading, 22% saw themselves primarily as substantive editors (twice the 11% who identified their work as substantive editing two years earlier), 10% described themselves as project managers while 36% agreed that it was impossible to distinguish between combinations of these activities. Many used job titles: commissioning editor, acquisition editor, publisher, communications manager, development editor, writing services manager, web writer/editor, corporate communications, team manager, partner in a writing and editing business, managing editor and more.
- In this survey, a slightly higher proportion (48% compared with 46%) of respondents worked as employees. Just under half of respondents were freelance, with the rest describing their employment status in various ways, including contractor, company director and, in one case, 'dormant'!

Rates

The 2005 survey reported a significant increase in the reported rates editors charge. The national average hourly rate of \$61, a marked increase on the \$50 average reported in the previous two surveys, had barely increased in 2007 and is now \$62.55, to be precise.

A breakdown by state and territory follows: average hourly rates for editing were \$66 in Victoria, \$65 in NSW, \$64 in the ACT, \$63 in South Australia,

\$62 in Tasmania, \$56 in Queensland and \$51 in Western Australia. There were some overseas respondents and some which were unidentified by state. The average figure for this 'other' category was \$62 but it is based on a small sample.

The huge variations reported in previous surveys are still a feature of the profession. The highest reported hourly rate for editing was \$160 and the lowest was \$34. All these findings relate to freelance editing rates. Higher rates are charged for services such as project management and document development.

Comments about rates included 'Some publications have low fixed rates', 'corporate and educational editing seems to pay better than trade and commercial book editing', 'I should be charging more' and 'other editors tend to be cagey about what they charge'.

One respondent observed that editors should charge as much as graphic designers. 'Rates for most editors depend on what the client is willing to pay', said another. 'Charging low rates results in the industry being seen as a cottage industry'. Pleas for IPEd and professional associations to provide advice on rates repeated comments in earlier years. Geography was a reason cited by several respondents for low rates—the comment was that in smaller states and country towns, higher rates are harder to achieve. A common strategy is to charge different rates for different clients, according to capacity to pay and the perceived going rate in that area of the industry. Another comment that was echoed by many was that it is better to charge by the job than by the hour and several respondents remarked that they charge the same rate regardless of the type of work performed (proofreading, copyediting, structural editing).

I'll leave you with this realistic but hopeful comment on rates: 'People work for very low rates for editing, therefore undercutting each other. However, sometimes you get what you pay for. Hopefully, accreditation will even this out a bit more.'

Challenges

Extending skills was the challenge most frequently cited as the most important and it was the most commonly listed item overall, followed by **keeping abreast of technology** and **maintaining and extending networks**. Managing workload emerged as a common challenge for many, who commented that the workflow is often out of their direct control when clients and publishers are late with manuscripts or don't allow sufficient time for the work to be done. Several respondents identified their efforts to have clients value editorial work as a challenge.

Priorities

A **greater public promotion** role by professional associations was the clear favourite development requested by respondents, with the highest number of people listing this as their number one priority, followed by the need for the provision of more **professional development** for editors, followed closely by a desire for a **greater employment brokerage role** on the part of societies.

As in earlier years, many stressed the need for a **mentoring scheme, career advice and career development**. Many commented favourably on the establishment of the accreditation scheme. Other suggestions were more liaison with industries beyond publishing, and a plea for a greater sense of professionalism among editors.

Subject areas

Once again, the most common description for most editors was 'generalists'. **Education** was by far the most common subject area with 48 responses. Next was science (34), trade fiction and non-fiction (14), history (13), government, the environment (each with 10), academic, business and finance (each with 9), health (8), theology and religion, corporate, medicine and the arts (all with 7), and biography or memoir, law and maths (all with 5)

The many single-item responses included intelligence, current affairs, music, accounting and biology.

Here are some more parting quotes from respondents:

“I think editors need to be micro-specialists and macro-generalists.”

*“We’re not paid enough for what we do, and we need greater awareness and visibility and value of our profession... We will be paid more when people appreciate what we do – or when **men** enter the profession.”*

“Despite my science background, I’m finding that editing other areas (e.g. management and business) is surprisingly straightforward. I’m coming to think that editing in an area different from my background may well be an advantage – I can better stand back and take an objective view of how understandable the text really is.”

“I enjoy and pursue a lot of variety and eclecticism in my work and so have successfully resisted specialisation.”

“I’d like to see more professional support for freelancers starting off. A mentoring scheme would be valuable and could even be ‘fee for service’. Work experience schemes with publishers would also be useful.”

“I am sick of hearing about women supplementing their income when they are stuck at home with kids by doing ‘a bit of editing’. I wouldn’t dream of doing ‘a little doctoring’ or ‘a little engineering’. Editors need to be acknowledged as professionals, and important ones at that.”

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