

Fifth national survey of editors

Pamela Hewitt

We may be seeing the beginning of a movement back to in-house editing and away from freelancing, according to the fifth national survey of editors. Employees accounted for almost 60% of the 89 survey responses, coming in as a majority for the first time.

The terms editor, copyeditor and substantive editor are less likely to be used than at any time in the past eight years. The majority of respondents (53%) now see themselves primarily as, for example, a project manager, communications manager or writing consultant.

The importance of professional development has always been high on the list of priorities for editors but this survey saw it emerge as the clear first priority.

The survey saw an increase in the reported national average hourly rate to \$66, up a modest \$4 an hour since the 2007 survey.

These findings come from the fifth national survey of editors, conducted at the IPEd conference, 'Getting the message across' in Adelaide in October 2009.

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

Who is an Australian editor?

- At this year's conference, female respondents outnumbered men slightly more than in the past, with 89% female respondents and 10% male.
- The age breakdown has been remarkably stable from conference to conference. In 2009, 64% of respondents were 45 or over, 14% were 35 or under, while 22% were between 36 and 45.

- As all the previous surveys have shown, editors are highly educated. The percentage of editors who hold at least a degree remains high, at 90%. In 2009, the number of higher degrees was 30%. Many respondents reported multiple higher degrees, for example two Masters degrees or a Masters and a Doctorate. There was an increasing trend for specialist qualifications in editing and publishing.
- Participation in professional development programs continued the emphasis for professional skills upgrading noted in previous surveys, with 67% reporting that they have attended more than four professional development programs. Comments on the topic included that it is “*Very important – needs to be affordable, relevant, diverse and current*”, that there is “*Not enough*”, we “*need more on the business of editing, billing, stationery, correspondence*”, “*Would like to do more targeted editing pd*”, “*It is critical*” and “*A must in this rapidly changing technological age*”. See also the comments on priorities below, many of which highlighted professional development.
- Almost half of the respondents (48%) had more than 10 years’ experience as an editor, with a greater proportion of newer entrants than in previous surveys (29% 1–5 years and 23% 6–10 years).
- The proportion of full-time editors was slightly lower, at 49% compared with 54% two years earlier, with 26% working part time and a substantially higher 22% working as an editor in addition to other employment. These findings suggest that the proportion of editors who make their living solely from editing is falling. This is likely to be a combination of a decline in dedicated editing positions and a movement of editors towards managerial roles.
- The changing role of editors in the publishing industry continues to be reflected in the terms we use to describe our work. The proportion of respondents who described their role as copyediting or proofreading declined from 31% to 22%, only 14% saw themselves primarily as substantive editors (down from 22% in 2007), 9% described themselves as project managers while 35% agreed that it was impossible to distinguish between combinations of these activities. A significant 20% used different job titles: the most common word was manager (including variants managing editor, information manager, and communications manager); teacher and writer were the two next most

common descriptions of employment roles (variations included lecturer and writing consultant).

- For the first time, employees exceeded freelance respondents to the survey, with 59% employees against 34% freelance and 7% 'other'. This is a major departure from the findings of previous surveys, where the breakdown between employees and freelancers was close to equal and suggests a structural shift in the industry.

Rates

Since I began running these surveys eight years ago, the reported hourly rate for freelance editing has increased every two years. This survey is no exception, despite the recession. The reported national average hourly rate is now \$66, up a modest \$4 an hour since the 2007 survey. Other differences emerged in the findings. The vast fluctuations between highest and lowest hourly rates appear to have averaged out significantly. In 2009, the highest rate listed was \$112 and the lowest was \$45, whereas in 2007, these figures were \$160 and \$34, respectively. It could be that editors who charge lower rates did not attend the conference in the numbers they did in past years. More optimistically, it might also be the case that publicising rates every two years has encouraged editors to charge more than the lowest reported rates in earlier surveys.

A breakdown by state and territory follows: the highest average hourly rates for editing were \$72 in Victoria, followed by Queensland with \$71, \$69 in South Australia, \$62 in Western Australia, \$59 in Tasmania, \$58 in NSW, and \$57 in the ACT. (Note that the sample sizes for Tasmania, Western Australia and the ACT were low.) I have not included the MEAA (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance) daily rates of \$840–850 in these figures, nor have I included employee hourly rates, since they do not include consideration of sick leave, annual leave, superannuation, training, equipment and other costs covered by freelance editors. As in past surveys, I have averaged rate ranges so that when a response lists a range of \$50–60, for example, I record it as \$55.

Several people commented that they vary their rates according to the client, charging more where there is the means to pay higher rates. Here are some other comments on rates:

- *“It is discouraging to realise how resistant the market is to paying appropriate fees for service.”*
- *“I pay \$80 an hour to have a plumber fix a toilet. I don’t think that \$80/hour is too much to ask for editorial skills. However, each job is on its merits. I believe editors sell their services too cheap.”*
- *“I charge the same rate for all new quoted jobs. My ‘core’ clients have a fixed rate from which they haven’t budged for nearly 3 years.”*
- *“Charging more now that I am an AE. Sometimes charge less for charitable organisations or initially to gain work.”*
- *“I can’t understand why editing seems to attract higher hourly rates than proofreading.”*
- *“I have had a brilliant year with enormous amounts of varied work from diverse sources. The work is finding me!”*
- *“I wish editors would be courageous and all raise their rates on a regular basis!”*
- *“I will always support (and pay) good rates for editors (\$70–90) but note that I’m beginning to get offers of editing services from the US. We need to keep our training up and make sure we have top skills to offer.”*

Challenges

Echoing the last survey’s findings, **extending skills** was the priority most frequently cited as the most important, followed again by **keeping abreast of technology**. In 2009, **changing directions as an editor** appeared for the first time in the top three priorities, perhaps as a result of greater economic uncertainties. Other priorities listed by individual editors included *“pressure to cut costs and time from schedules”*, *“quoting and charging”*, *“promoting the importance of editing to colleagues and establishing processes”* for in-house editors. Several responses that come under the general heading of time management (handling the volume of work, workload and client load).

Priorities

The need for the provision of more **professional development** for editors was far and away the most commonly listed priority. Specific requests were for mentoring and residential training. A **greater public promotion** role by

professional associations was the next clear favourite development requested by respondents, followed by a **greater employment brokerage role** on the part of societies. Of those who rated **national initiatives for editors** in their top three priorities, the most common area for action was promotion, also expressed as “*branding*” or “*recognition*”. Other suggestions included “*uniform membership across societies*”, “*fees and charges*”, including “*promulgating a national recommended minimum freelance rate*”

Subject areas

There was a broader distribution of subject areas than in previous surveys. Respondents nominated more than a hundred different specialist areas. A comment that summed up this trend was “*I charge more for specialist knowledge and prefer diversity*”. This year, only 21 people described themselves as “*generalists*”.

Education continued to be the most commonly listed subject area with 32 responses, followed by **science** (21). The next most common subject areas were **business and finance** (8), **environment, health** and **history**, both with 7 responses, then **fiction, academic** and **medical** editing, with 6.

For the first time, some survey participants listed **online editing** as a discrete field — online editing, publishing, teaching and learning materials.

Smaller multiple responses were recorded for subject areas such as agriculture, community, corporate, government humanities, IT, legal, maths, magazines, non-fiction, poetry, self-help and welfare.

The hundred or so different single-item responses included subjects as diverse as smart farms, child protection, international agreements, legislation, mining, museology, textiles and quality assurance.

Comments

Two respondents commented that they felt ‘alienated’ as a result of failing the accreditation exam. One drew attention to the small proportion of members who hold the credential and another commented that the high failure rate would deter future professionals. Another suggestion about accreditation was

to allow candidates to opt for a copyediting and proofreading exam as well as full editing accreditation.

A practical and detailed suggestion from one survey was for IPEd to produce templates for client briefs, designer briefs, author feedback and tips for writers unfamiliar with the benefits of editing. Another practical suggestion was for the development of standard contracts for editors. A valid comment which I'll incorporate in future surveys is to include a salary scale for employees as well as asking freelancers' hourly rates.

Here are some parting quotes from respondents:

"I think IPEd and the societies are dynamic and operating very well to promote the interests of editors. Keep up the good work!"

"The amount of jargon is overwhelming. Don Watson for President!"

"I am enjoying freelance work... and am succeeding in earning ...and achieving my goals."

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