

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP)

The SfEP is the national organization for UK editorial workers – editors, proofreaders, project managers and allied professionals – providing them with training, accreditation and support. Its aims are to promote high editorial standards and professional recognition. The majority of its 1400 members are self-employed, but the membership also includes employees and employers.

In this response on behalf of SfEP's membership to *Publishing Sector Draft Strategy 2009*, the SfEP Council draws the Publishing Skills Council's attention to several concerns, which amount to saying that

- the report *Skills Needs Analysis for the Publishing Industry*, on which the strategy is based, is inadequate, and as a result
- the draft strategy is seriously deficient.

The SfEP makes specific points on each strand of the draft strategy and proposes a new strand.

SfEP concerns about the report *Skills Needs Analysis for the Publishing Industry*

The relevant information in the report is patchy. Filling the gaps in the data would have had a valuable impact on the skills-needs analysis and development of appropriate strategy.

1. The self-employed

As far as the Society is aware, there has been no attempt to consult the Society, its members or any self-employed editorial workers, nor to involve any of these groups in the skills-needs analysis on which the strategy is based. Thus, the introductory paragraph is misleading: a detailed survey has not been completed. The SfEP notes that such involvement is part of the remit of Skillset and the Publishing Skills Council, given that the self-employed form about 25% of the workforce and the statement that 'individuals must be part of this shared national mission if the UK is to achieve world-class skills' (*Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world-class skills*).

2. The contributing stakeholders

These do not appear to be listed. Since the discussion is weighted towards news providers, the SfEP doubts whether the report is fully applicable to educational, learned, informational and fiction publishing.

3. Education, training and qualifications

Despite what the strategy's introduction says, the report contains no details of

- current education and training provision,
- education or training that is available but is not being utilized, or
- what types of education and training need to be developed.

The report mentions that freelancers need continuing professional development, but it does not identify what they need. No one seems to have asked staff what skills or knowledge (notably in electronic publishing) they feel they lack. The report recognizes the industry's need for highly qualified staff, but states that 'Publishing qualifications were – in general – out of date' – and the subject is left there. There is no description of existing qualifications and no discussion of what new ones might be needed. Filling all these gaps could have moulded a draft strategy with a very different focus.

4. Skills analysis

There is little or no description of the types of activities within publishing, notably editorial and production workers (no mention of proofreaders, indexers or typesetters) and apparently no understanding of what they do. The Society can only infer that they are part of the 41% of the workforce classified as ‘associate professional and technical’ (Table 2.7); the report does not illuminate. This category may be appropriate in an overview of all UK industry, in which it accounts for 14%, but the lack of further breakdown in an industry-specific report indicates a reluctance to consult or analyse in depth.

5. Statistical analysis

There are no statistical tests nor any scientific rigour as to the possible causes of the observed differences between the publishing industry and national statistics. For example, among the results that could well be significant, why does this industry have:

- twice the difficulty in recruiting sales staff as England overall (Table 4.6)?
- double the staff turnover and yet only 7% reporting difficulties with terms and conditions as opposed to 15% generally (page 39)?
- a 40–50% shortage in core (communication/writing) skills, compared with 30–34% generally, and yet 45% of its staff are educated to NVQ level 4 or higher, compared with 30% across all UK industry (Table 4.8)?

6. Salaries

Despite skills and salaries being closely connected, there is no mention of pay for different occupations and little discussion of the issue at all. There are two facts in the report that relate to salary but are never considered together, yet they illustrate its importance to this industry: ‘poor salaries for new journalists was cited as an area of concern’ [*sic*] and ‘When facing hard-to-fill vacancies ... [o]nly a minority look to increase salaries (four per cent)’, a similar figure to the UK overall. If the industry does not look at how it values its skilled workers, it will not be able to reduce high staff turnover, skills shortages or hard-to-fill vacancies.

7. Information publishing

This large sector of the publishing industry is mentioned only once (in discussing copyright issues). It includes public utilities, other companies, health trusts and other bodies, charitable trusts, museums and galleries, professional institutions, emergency services, legal services, Parliament, central government, devolved and regional bodies, local government, quangos and government agencies. None of these seems to have contributed to the report, yet they are competing for the same skilled workforce. The brain drain from the industry will continue if skills are considered in isolation from remuneration.

8. New business models

The report mentions new business models and delivery systems, but it does not consider in detail either the new skills required or the shift in attributing costs. Thus it misses a chance to discuss the labour costs versus other production costs that would allow the draft strategy to consider cost-management and product-development skills.

9. Management consultation

It seems that only high-level management has been involved in the consultation, but people at this level are not best placed to say whether hard-to-fill vacancies or skills shortages result from lack of skills or some other factor. There is no doubt that the book/journal industry faces

difficulties and has tried for years to cut labour costs. The SfEP doubts that the industry's standards are 'being undermined by the levels of literacy displayed by new recruits' and other skills shortages *per se*. Contributing variables include working conditions, cost cutting, each publisher having its own house standard, new recruits being expected to get up to speed immediately with what is expected of them and the effects of high staff turnover.

Although the report contains data that give inklings as to why there are hard-to-fill vacancies and skills shortages, it does not consider them effectively. For example, it comments: 'during discussions with the newspaper sector, poor salaries for new journalists was cited as an area of concern'. This should have been reported by the book/journal sectors as well. The SfEP is unsure whether this is an oversight of the consultants or of those consulted, but notes that this is a major concern that affects skills availability and thus should have been appraised.

Why the report falls short

A skills-needs analysis inherently requires an honest and thorough appraisal. Only in this way can the consultants make true statements about skills needs and employers be put 'at the heart of scrutinising the system' (*Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the global economy – world-class skills*).

This report is based on incomplete evidence and is strewn with evidence of its lack of thoroughness. The Society seriously questions the adequacy and appropriateness of the knowledge base available to both those performing the consultation and those consulted. The Society is concerned that those who implement the strategy will refer to the report while being unaware of its failings.

The SfEP also believes that a report on the UK publishing industry should apply the standards for which the industry is recognized and valued. For instance, a document of such (potential) complexity would serve its purpose better by using a citation/reference system. It is also clear that no professional editorial services were used in the document's preparation; these and the creation of an index would have spotted the factual and logical inconsistencies in the report.

SfEP concerns about the draft strategy for the publishing industry

Strand 1: Inform aspiring entrants of the realities of the industry

Part of this information will undoubtedly be what salary enquirers can expect, so increased awareness will not necessarily help to solve recruitment or skills-shortage problems. Maybe a strand on informing employers of the realities would be just as or more useful.

Strand 2: Improve further and higher education provision

The SfEP cannot argue with this sentiment, yet the Society wonders how useful the 'feedback on skills gaps' will be if the source is *Skills Needs Analysis for the Publishing Industry*. It also wonders what are considered as 'relevant accreditation bodies', as these were not listed in the consultation report. The SfEP considers itself to be one such body.

Strand 3: Bridge gap between education and employment

The SfEP welcomes this proposal. Some years ago, the SfEP wanted to set up a mentored work-experience scheme and needed seed money. With a few exceptions, the publishing industry felt it was inappropriate for them to fund this. Money from five or six publishers allowed the Society to set up the mentoring scheme, which today is active and expanding.

The SfEP considers Skillset's Media Academy network wholly inappropriate to develop links with the book/journal publishing industry. Skillset is focused on creative media, commonly understood to be audio-visual, and indeed a search of www.skillset.org with the search term 'editor' provides information only in this context. Moreover, Skillset describes its purpose in establishing the Skillset Media Academies as being 'in response to the television and interactive media industries' desire'.

Given that the SfEP currently serves the needs of book/journal publishing, as well as other sectors of the publishing industry, and is already engaged in transfer of experience, it is well placed to develop new bridging initiatives.

Strand 4: Improve and develop digital skills for the workforce

The SfEP is concerned that only journalists are specifically mentioned in this strand. There is a need for digital skills training for editorial staff in information publishing as well. This need will become even more apparent when single-source, multi-platform delivery, the most satisfactory method of delivering via the internet, becomes a more mainstream activity.

The future use of single-source content will demand that proofreaders and editors are familiar with, or at least have background knowledge of, document management systems and XML-editing and -processing tools and schemas. Currently, these skills are sourced within the traditional IT community and, although editorial workers could contribute more to these workflows, they are seldom asked to do so nor properly informed.

The Society believes that much stronger links between content managers, digital typesetters and editorial workers will be needed in the future, and these emerging skills will require new training provision. The SfEP would be interested in exploring the possibilities of extending training provision for these emerging skills needs and, as such, we would like to be part of the digital working group.

Strand 5: Improve and develop marketing and media sales skills for the workforce

The SfEP offers little comment here, bearing in mind that there is said to be a shortage of such skills nationwide, except to note that publishing's comparative difficulty in recruiting could be a result of its reluctance to pay appropriately, combined with the higher salaries and many opportunities available to this occupational sector, rather than shortage of skills *per se*.

Strand 6: Improve and develop leadership and management skills

The SfEP welcomes the development of such skills and the use of diagnostic support. In its experience, some fail where others would succeed; failure leads to inefficiencies, poor job satisfaction, stress and poor product quality. The SfEP's mentoring scheme is another opportunity that can be explored to provide diagnosis from the freelancers' perspective.

Additional strand: Improve and develop business analysis and costing skills

The challenge for publishers struggling to make profits is to use new business-focused skills to reduce costs, rather than the strategy of increasingly poor pay. This strategy is inappropriate in an industry that relies almost entirely on people to create its product.

The SfEP notes that there will be the opportunity to attach an increased cost to editorial labour alongside the implementation of paperless products and greater management efficiency. The increase should be in real terms as well as relative terms, to reverse the long-

standing trend that has contributed to the state of the industry today. Many freelance workers now find it difficult to attend training regularly because they are unable to self-fund the fees with the levels of pay they are offered. There remain no opportunities to reduce the costs of editorial labour other than outsourcing to foreign workforces, and experience has shown that this has a negative effect on product quality.

A more realistic cost–profit and business analysis by people who are fully aware of the value of what editorial professionals do will have numerous benefits, not least consistent product quality and a healthier industry.

The SfEP can contribute:

- a large and significant group of skilled, well-qualified publishing professionals,
- experience as an established provider of training and mentoring in publishing skills,
- solid publishing qualifications and the development of more,
- understanding of the needs and expertise of editorial freelances.

The SfEP wishes to be involved in developing the publishing industry’s skills strategy and would like to be consulted regularly and kept informed.