

Preparing for a taxonomy project

The universe, real or intelligible, can be represented from an infinite variety of perspectives, & the number of possible systems of human knowledge is as large as the number of these perspectives.

(Diderot, 1755, quoted in Blom, 2005: 152)

Building a taxonomy is more a journey of discovery than a piece of analysis. The Babel Instinct requires that a successful taxonomist be more a diplomat than a scientist. In a knowledge management context, pragmatism will always trump tidiness, and the connection with organisational effectiveness must never be lost. This is why the people we assume might make good taxonomy ‘specialists’ (records managers, librarians, information scientists) may not necessarily be the best equipped to develop your taxonomy for you – unless they understand what drives your organisation’s performance and effectiveness. Tidy minds make bad corporate taxonomies, for the simple reason that few corporate environments are, or can be, tidy (Norman, 2006).

In this chapter we look at the steps involved in preparing for a taxonomy project and the processes that will help ensure the pragmatism, relevance and usability of your taxonomy. As you’ll see from Figure 7.1, arriving at a clear understanding of your purpose may be an iterative process and doesn’t simply stop at finding out what the project sponsor wants. In fact, the entire taxonomy-building process is an iterative one, because competing needs and perspectives may need to be resolved and underlying needs may not always be immediately obvious.