

## Designing your taxonomy

*A manageable work classification scheme works in practice, is not too fine-grained or arcane in its distinctions, and it fits with the way work is organised ... Such a perfect scheme however does not exist. In the real world these areas trade off against each other ... These trade-offs become areas of negotiation and sometimes of conflict.*

(Bowker and Star, 1999: 232–3)

When we sit down to build a taxonomy, we are engaging in an ancient human art, and the methods we follow are ancient too. We gather the stuff of our world around us, we sort them into their kinds as they make sense to us and we name the kinds. When we are building a taxonomy to cover knowledge and information assets, our ‘stuff’ is more abstract, but we engage in essentially the same steps. We gather evidence of the things we want the structure of our taxonomy to support, we put them into groups and we name the groups.

It is, of course, a touch more complicated than that, because we are not Adam and Eve in the never-before-classified Garden of Eden. We have a lot of inherited vocabulary and both implicit and explicit categories embedded in our population and our processes, many of them in competition with each other. This is the additional negotiation and resolution step that Adam and Eve did not have. But the ancient pattern is still there: in any taxonomy project we must gather our evidence, sort it all out in ways that meet our purpose, and figure it out from there (see Figure 8.1).