Book Review

The accidental taxonomist

Heather Hedden

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The full range of history, explication, design and implementation of taxonomies is the subject of this informative, plain-spoken and timely book by Heather Hedden, a freelance taxonomist and owner of Hedden Information Management. Hedden is an experienced taxonomist, working for a variety of private sector information providers as well as information-intensive industries, and has presented and conducted workshops in taxonomy development internationally. She is also an instructor in taxonomy development through the continuing education program at the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science in Boston.

Hedden constructs the book logically in 12 chapters with four appendices. The book can be broken into roughly four major parts, with Chapters 1–7 explaining what taxonomies are and who creates them, followed by chapters outlining the nuts and bolts of taxonomies – terms and relationships between terms – as well as software utilization in creating taxonomies. Readers will be surprised to note how long taxonomies have been in use (centuries) and how much they are incorporated into our daily lives. Eleven figures in Chapter 1 alone illustrate the assorted taxonomy types discussed, and the examples are timely and informative. A useful chapter not often included in such explanatory texts is Chapter 2, where Hedden identifies the people who make taxonomies happen. She covers the background of taxonomists (varied), the essential skill set, peripheral duties and employment sectors and options. Hedden even discusses job titles and educational preparation. This chapter adds a significant dose of reality to the topic and serves as a good preparation for

the final chapter which examines the growth of taxonomy work as well as the development of new professionals and, indeed, in the development of a professional field of taxonomy itself.

The second part of the book, Chapters 6–9, examines taxonomy development for human indexers as well as for automated indexing and then follows with chapters that detail taxonomy structures (Chapter 8) and taxonomy displays (Chapter 9). Both of these chapters have excellent examples, especially the chapter on taxonomy displays. Hedden's discussion of hierarchical taxonomies as well as faceted taxonomies is clear and helps to distinguish the unique qualities and applicability of each of these taxonomy types. Her discussion of taxonomy displays emphasizes the needs of the user in determining what and how much to display of a given taxonomy structure and links taxonomy development squarely within the realm of user-centered design and the field of informatics.

Part three, Chapters 10–11, outline the steps in the creation of taxonomies as well as the implementation of them. Hedden devotes considerable attention to the planning process, the particular needs and qualities of enterprise taxonomies, the actual creation process and the maintenance of taxonomies. Once a taxonomy is created the work is far from done and in many ways is just beginning. These chapters help to give form to the process, demystify it, scale it and guide it cogently and thoroughly from beginning to end.

The book concludes with an examination of employment potential for taxonomists and the growth of the professional taxonomist, including education and training and the development of

communities of interest. The development of standards, the founding of professional associations and the development of a communicable knowledge base is essential for the development of any profession. Hedden makes clear that taxonomists are approaching this point rapidly.

The four appendices reveal the survey research Hedden undertook that form the basis of the data for Chapter 2 as well as provide a basic glossary, recommended reading and a list of online resources valuable for those interested or involved in taxonomy development and utilization.

The strengths of this text are its clear and concise writing style, the significant number of figures and illustrations used throughout the book and its comprehensive approach to the topic. Hedden has written a book that can become a standard text for introductory courses in this area and provides sound, practical information and direction on this topic without unnecessary theorizing. As she makes clear, most people now working in this area began work in it quite by accident, but that aspect of the

work is changing as the definition of taxonomy expands and its usefulness across all disciplines involved with information, the management of information and the technology used in it becomes more apparent.

As an introductory text or a basic reference guide for novice taxonomists and students, *The Accidental Taxonomist* is a concise and easily digestible resource worthy of the attention of beginners and professors of introductory information organization and retrieval courses and workshops. It provides excellent up-to-date examples of taxonomy concepts and illustrates some of the most important taxonomy uses and types, as well as how to create them. It makes a complex topic more comprehensible and immediately applicable.

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