

**The Accidental Taxonomist.** Heather Hedden. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2010. 442pp. ISBN: 978-1-57387-397-0 (pbk) US\$39.50

For someone coming to taxonomy through indexing, understanding the subtle differences between the two disciplines might be a challenge. If taxonomy is defined as “the practice of naming and organizing things” and indexing is “identifying and organizing names and concepts”, then the common ground is immediately apparent, with only the emphasis on “concepts” in indexing marking the divergence. Indexers are indeed thinking about their own taxonomy in the initial stages of starting an index, even if they do not think of it as such. This “accidental” discovery of taxonomies is where Heather Hedden begins.

So a taxonomy is a support for indexing. Hence, for indexers who may have been compiling taxonomies in their heads as they index, Hedden’s book is a practical reference for the avoidance of confusion during the indexing process. Indexers may encounter taxonomy accidentally, but there is nothing at all accidental about this author’s writing. Her subject is covered in plain language, with an encyclopedic thoroughness, making this an essential acquisition for newcomers to the field and useful for the experienced professional needing to fill a few gaps in their knowledge. The amusing epigrams beginning each chapter serve to remind us of taxonomy’s place in the real world and not just an abstract tool divorced from any wider interaction.

Beginning with definitions, Hedden distinguishes taxonomies, or hierarchical classification systems, from controlled vocabularies, thesauri, and ontologies. Then the applications and purposes of taxonomies are covered in a detailed discussion of how taxonomies can support consistency in indexing. A history of the term includes its roots and the explosion of its usage as a “hot topic” for librarians and indexers in the 1990s.

So, who are taxonomists? Like indexers, taxonomists are split between full and part-timers and, also like indexers, many have a background in library science and/or indexing which, in the absence of any taxonomy certification, provides the best preparation for this kind of work. Hedden describes over a dozen skill sets required by anyone considering getting into this and related fields.

In the chapter on creating terms, the section on “identifying concepts” should be very familiar to indexers, though it is not identical to indexing, where meticulous searching for concepts requires a greater understanding of the text beyond mere lists of contents. In a taxonomy, the selection of terms should match the original text with the term most likely to be selected by the user. The author’s examples of the types of synonyms which may need to be chosen between include:

Doctors/physicians

Movies/motion pictures/films

Cars/automobiles/motors/autos

Relationships between terms are divided into three categories: equivalence, hierarchical and associative; and from there many examples are provided to amplify the terms used, e.g. for the preferred term “Oil and gas industry” she offers seven possible non-preferred terms. Lest we are caught in the trap

of seeing how many non-preferred terms we can find or create, guidelines are given to contain the length of lists to maximize user benefits.

An entire chapter is devoted to software for taxonomy creation and management. This takes us from basic spreadsheets to highly specialized software, with detailed charts and discussions on how to exploit the strengths of each.

The relative advantages and disadvantages of creating taxonomies for human as opposed to automated indexing are discussed in detail in two chapters. If one is concerned about the increasing role of technology in publishing, here is a detailed discussion of the human vs machine debate which explains why both will be needed for the foreseeable future: humans for their skills in the selection of concepts and automatons for processing the massive volumes of data associated with the organization of, for example, government records or news items. If you have ever been confused by the distinctions between the terms tagging, keywording, cataloging, classifying and indexing, all is here made clear.

Structures of taxonomies are examined through hierarchies, facets and categories, emphasising how these alternatives are not mutually exclusive. While it is important to have well-selected terms, the overall structure is equally crucial. If a taxonomy is a structure for organizing knowledge, it must itself be carefully organized. Then, once the terms and structure are in place the display of the information needs to be considered. That taxonomies may not always be fully displayed to the end-user raises a discussion of end-user requirements and the different types of displays that are possible: alphabetical simple lists, alphabetical flat formats, full term hierarchy, top term hierarchy, and permuted (rotated) indexes.

The closing chapters cover taxonomy planning, design, and creation, plus implementation and evolution, before finishing with a review of taxonomists as contractors, the training of taxonomists, and organizations, networking, and resources available.

Each chapter gives charts and examples to further amplify the text. In addition to endnotes with her research sources, Hedden has provided a detailed, five-page, recommended reading list, seven pages of web sites, and a 24-page double-column index.

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