

Leveraging, Locating and Retrieving Content: the ROI of Taxonomy



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As the paradigm shift from print to digital continues at an astonishingly rapid pace, employees are creating and saving terabytes of [digital content to internal systems](#). At the same time, varied naming conventions render it difficult to locate and retrieve critical files once they are sent into the abyss of these systems.

Constructing an intuitive hierarchical classification structure, or taxonomy, for an organization's intellectual assets, is becoming mission critical. Without the implementation of a comprehensive taxonomy, time and money are increasingly being wasted by staff searching for content.

This informational chaos alone should drive business leaders to develop and implement a robust, standard vocabulary for labeling or tagging business critical content across their organizations.

Creating a concise, custom taxonomy for an organization will also improve overall communications within the organization and enable employees to have a voice in augmenting organizational procedures and practices. Thus, creating an intuitive taxonomy within your organization can be both a team building exercise and an investment with multifaceted dividends coupled with a high ROI.

Taxonomy Implementations Produce a High ROI

Assume for a moment that you work in the marketing department of an organization which is heavily focused on IT. Your definition of a widget and its corresponding keywords or descriptors may be different than IT's definition of the same widget. Unless there is a controlled vocabulary to tie these widgets together, both departments may believe they are talking about different widgets, but in reality, they are speaking about the exact same thing. Think of all of the wasted time this costs your organization.

A comprehensive, well-designed taxonomy can erase ambiguities in common terminologies that may exist cross-functionally throughout an organization. By agreeing on a standard term and linking the differing terms (widgets) as synonyms, the organization now will recognize that an apple and an orange can really both be apples.

Isn't it time for your organization to quantify the risks of not beginning a taxonomy project?

Taxonomy is Time Consuming and Expensive -- NO!

Developing a comprehensive taxonomy may seem like a highly conceptual effort that will require significant investment. This is not necessarily true. We have seen several cases where organizations spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on this exercise and never implemented the finished taxonomy because the project was seen as low priority by management.

Qualified taxonomy consultants will not only partner with you in building and implementing an enterprise taxonomy for which the ROI far exceeds the cost of the project, they will tell your team when to draw the line and implement the solution.

Will Googling Your Content Be a Long-term Solution?

Most employees are casual searchers who are accustomed to "Googlizing" any intranet or internet search engine by using broad macro terms or phrases. The key to improving search results is targeting your taxonomy to this audience while keeping and linking the more granular terms on the backend. If the end product is designed and implemented to improve productivity of your employees, this endeavor will be deemed a victory.

For example, the taxonomy we designed for a well-known membership organization had buy-in from the top. The organization was implementing an entirely new content management system and their goal was to increase the "findability" of their intellectual capital as well as improve their website's overall usability.

After extensive due diligence, and hundreds of hours of additional research, they realized that the only way they could successfully implement a new CMS was to ensure their content was

both well-organized and re-tagged properly with an authoritative taxonomy and controlled vocabulary before migrating it to the new CMS.

Retagging the culled content with the new taxonomic terms was a huge success for the organization and usability and findability have increased over 30 percent in the first few months. Imagine what these increases would do for an organization whose website was based on e-commerce and not just intellectual capital.

Creating Community While Improving Organizational Communications

Building a taxonomy is a collaborative technology project that needs to be promoted, implemented and managed at a grass roots level. While it is fine for the initial planning and funding decisions to be made at the management level, in order for it to be successful, the project must include all levels of the organization.

As we have seen time and time again, what happens in the mail-room, warehouse and some administrative functions never reaches the stakeholder level. This is a mistake and akin to the old adage: “if you really want to know what goes on in an organization, ask the CEO’s assistant.”

A clearly defined strategy to build an organization’s taxonomy can leverage the tacit and institutional knowledge that never seems to be properly captured within an organization.

This is where experienced consultants with a fresh perspective can cut across misperceptions and miscommunication and spearhead a cultural shift in an organization. However, consultants will only be as successful as their access to the organization allows.

While developing cross-functional and cross-level relationships, the consultants can cut through bias and develop an agnostic view of the organization. By allowing broad-based exposure to an organization, including contact with customers, offers the potential to influence and evolve organizational and culture practices around content management over the long term. This is a critical element in the discovery phase of any taxonomy project.

Building Consensus and Community

A multidisciplinary internal committee responsible for overseeing the consulting project is another linchpin for a successful outcome. The committee also assumes responsibility for identifying subject matter experts to validate the direction the taxonomy is taking and ensures alignment with the organization's overall business strategy.

Having a point person or project manager to schedule all meetings and disseminate information to and from the consultants leaves little room for miscommunication. A project manager, knowledgeable about the industry as well as organizational politics, will rein in random ideas, make sense of various input streams and document progress.

As the committee members start to buy into the business goals and become more deeply engaged in working on the taxonomy, they will become evangelists for the initiative with their colleagues throughout the organization.

In this age of information overload and correspondence by messages of 140 characters or less, the value of relationship building and the human touch has gone by the wayside. Building a strong working relationship between the client organization and consultants is the key to achieving a successful outcome.

HA! -- We Really Don't Need a Taxonomy

We leave you with a couple of questions to ponder.

How many times have you been to a retailer's website with the intention of purchasing something and not made a purchase because you could not locate what you wanted quickly so you ended up going to another retailer or a brick and mortar store because it was easier?

Or, how many times have you tried to locate a colleague's brief or white paper on your company intranet and could not locate it?

The frequency of these instances is high and you remember those events with some clarity, correct? In fact, how many times do those sites even get a second chance?

A site or intranet that has been intuitively designed and made easily navigable with proper taxonomic choices will not suffer this fate. A site or intranet with a thoughtful, comprehensively designed taxonomy will be returned to and bookmarked by users, resulting in increased productivity and higher sales for your organization.

About the Author

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