Taxonomies for Documents and Folders

Introduction

Taxonomies have been used for many decades in the information management field. They are the basis of classification schemes and indexing systems such as the Dewey Decimal System. With the advent of the internet, there has been increased interest in using taxonomies for structuring information for easier management and retrieval. At their simplest, taxonomies are nothing more than systems for naming and organising things. One of the simplest applications is based on naming conventions – standard rules to be applied to documents and the physical and electronic folders storing these documents. This example demonstrates the value of taxonomies: they provide an interface for staff in an organisation to access information and knowledge relevant to their work and interests, and also to understand how to contribute to knowledge bases. Within development and humanitarian organisations, taxonomies can give a particular perspective on the organisation. Possible taxonomies include:

- Countries
    - e.g. Ethiopia, India, etc.
- Regions
    - e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, etc.
- Programme theme
    - HIV/AIDS, trade, gender, livelihoods, etc.
- Donors
    - Bilateral, foundations, etc.
- Document types
    - Proposal, project report, beneficiary feedback, etc.

Each of these categories can be used to signpost valuable knowledge and support better decision making. Implementing a simple but effective set of taxonomies can provide the basis for successful systems for information storage and capture, as well as for the overall knowledge and learning strategy. The key applications of taxonomies for development and humanitarian organisations are:

- Signposting and searching for files and folders on an intranet or shared drive;
- Classifying and searching for different kinds of staff expertise;
- Classifying and searching for different kinds of projects and programmes.

Users can use these taxonomies to access the information or experts they require, through the hierarchy of information. Of course, some users may prefer to search for information using dedicated search engines. In this situation, taxonomic searches might be supplemented by searches at different levels within the system. You may be able to search an entire intranet, or navigate to staff, programme or document-type levels and conduct a search within that category.

Detailed description of the process

Developing a taxonomy involves finding an appropriate breakdown for the diverse forms of information contained and used by different actors within an organisation.

- Start with a general category for the area of work being addressed, e.g. programme theme.
- Establish the subcategories for this category. These can be developed by answering the question 'what types of [e.g. programme themes] are there?'
- Repeat the process of division, based on the planned application of the taxonomy, and the users concerned. The division used should be consistent with the folders expectations of the users, otherwise it becomes hard for them to navigate the system intuitively.

- o For example, if the taxonomy is to be used for senior management or communications staff searching different projects in preparation for a press release, the taxonomy could be based on geography (and then region, and then country), type of project (and then advocacy, service delivery, etc.), team involved (development, humanitarian relief, conflict prevention).
- o By contrast, a project information system for use by project staff should be based on the categories and subcategories of information with which the staff member is likely to be familiar. This might include proposals, project initiation documents, budgets, background materials, relevant research reports, timelines, progress reports, final reports.

- Decide on standard terms. These should follow the same logic and consistency across different types of item, following the same pattern for similar situations so that, once learned, the user can reasonably predict how it will apply in a new situation. As an example, standard terms can be applied to:
  - o Use of standard naming conventions for organisation sub-units and people:
    - – As an example, a organisation may decide to always use 'HIV/AIDS Team' or 'Gender Team' rather than 'HIV/Aids Programme' or 'Gender Unit'.
    - – e.g. always use 'Navin Patel' rather than 'N Patel'.
  - o Use of standard names for projects and activities:
    - – e.g. always use 'Advocacy and Communications' rather than just 'Advocacy'.
  - o Use standard common terms for document types across units:
    - – e.g. always use 'Budget Report' instead of 'Financial Report'.
    - – e.g. always use 'Progress Reports' instead of 'Progress Updates'.

- Establish and share simple rules to encourage consistent practice and provide guidance on how to use different taxonomies. Example of rules for documents might include:
  - o Use one of these standard terms: Agenda; Report; Letter; Project schedule; Meeting Minutes.
  - o Do not use terms such as 'Presentation on...' in a title because different document types are already identified (e.g. as .ppt in the document title).
  - o Do not use the document creator's name in the title.
  - o Use structured titles in pre-specified formats which draw on the taxonomies, e.g., for standard document types, combine elements of a title to give the most useful information first, bearing in mind the folder structure and titling; for example, for a letter: topic – recipient – letter type.

Example: The OECD Macrothesaurus

Perhaps the most systematic collection of standard terms in the development sector is the now-discontinued OECD Macrothesaurus. Although work on this was ceased in 1998, it is still available online and – despite the odd anachronism – is still widely applicable today.

The discontinued version is available at http://info.uibk.ac.at/info/oecd-macroth and provides guidance for themes, document types, countries, regions, and so on. This is a good starting point for developing an organisational specific taxonomy.

Sources and further reading

- Online guide to building taxonomies: http://knowledgemanagement.ittoolbox.com/documents/popular-q-and-a/building-a-taxonomy-2056.