The Accidental Taxonomist
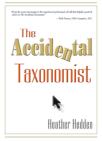
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One of the benefits of
being an information
scientist is that I know what
a taxonomy is. It would be
even better if I could build one! If you listen to some
search vendors, no one needs a taxonomy anymore—
search works without one. I beg to differ. This vendor
attitude simply proves that the role of taxonomies,
controlled-term lists, and thesauri are poorly understood
even by those who should know better. Hedden is a
professional taxonomist with a gift for translating
complex ideas into practical guidance.

In 12 chapters, she provides a very clear
introduction to terms and term relationships, surveys
software for taxonomy creation and management, and
sets out the commonalities and differences between
using taxonomies for both human and automated
indexing. I especially liked the chapter on hierarchies
and facets, which leads into a great chapter about the
ways to present hierarchies and fielded-search displays.

All this important preparatory work then leads to
Chapter 10, which is about taxonomy planning, design,
and creation—30 pages of guidance from someone who
has learned the hard way about the difficulties of doing
this type of work. Throughout the book, the use of
everyday examples makes the information come
to life, as the reader is taken through the use of
synonyms by reference to the difference in usage
of the terms "doctor" and "physician."

I'm not sure the last chapter about taxonomy as
a profession really fits into the scope of the book.
Up to that point, the book has an international
perspective, but the last chapter suddenly reminds
you that the book is published in the U.S. Appendices
list further reading and provide a good list of
websites. As you might expect, the index is flawless.

This book will sit in my office bookshelf at desk
height. I may not need to refer to it for several months,
but when a client mentions either of the "T" words
(taxonomy and thesaurus), I can reach for it and
suddenly become impressively erudite on the subject.
If you find that taxonomy development is mystifying,
challenging, and frustrating, then you, like most intranet
managers, need this book near your desk as well.