GUIDELINES FOR TAXONOMY AND SEARCH PROJECTS

BEFORE

1. <u>Don't do a blind copy of prior tender specs</u>

Tempting as it is to take a set of specs from a past taxonomy and search project or from another similar organisation, dust it off and reuse it, this might not be a good idea. Technology for instance changes so quickly that a functionality not available last year, might just be able to be done now. Users' requirements may have changed. Moreover, you can't be sure that the prior tender specs from another organisation are actually well-framed for your situation and context. Every requirement of your tender specs needs to be linked to a clear business/user need that you have identified, and then in turn needs to be connected to clear deliverables. A reader should be able to trace back every deliverable to an outline requirement and then to defined business/user needs.

2. <u>We can't be the only ones to need a taxonomy? Aren't there off-the-shelf ones we can get?</u>

Check whether your requirements are for standard taxonomies, such as geographical names, or engineering terms. Or you might need a standard taxonomy to exchange information with other agencies/ partners/ customers. If so, there are sites (e.g. [Taxonomy](#) [Warehouse](#)) that provide access to pre-built licensable taxonomies. However for corporate taxonomies meant to support search and discovery, terms are often very particular to the organisation and its people. Corporate objectives are very seldom similar if at all interchangeable. In any case, you should always test a proposed taxonomy, whether off the shelf, adapted, or custom-built, against your business and user needs to be sure that they work as intended.

3. <u>Include Change Management needs into project scoping</u>

A taxonomy and search project usually involves getting people to change habituated ways of working with information, from creation to storage, tagging, access, search, navigation and reuse. As with any such project, you'll need to ensure buy in and application of the new initiative. Do look closely at Change Management and engagement initiatives putting in place proper project management principles to also guide the post project phase, to support successful adoption.

4.   Pros / Cons of keeping specs high level

Specifications for a taxonomy project should always focus on the desired end outcomes. The goals themselves need to be clear whilst sufficient space needs to be made available for contractors to provide the best possible approach to achieving the desired outcome. Being too prescriptive would potentially bind the approach to achieving only a portion of what the project potential could have been. Leave space to listen to the various approaches experienced consultants can put across via an open procurement process. Else, vendors might be 'forced' to oblige blindly and deliver deliverables that fall short of excellence. On the other hand, if you under-specify a complex piece of work in the contract without making it clear how much work you expect it to be, then providers with a detailed methodology will be disadvantaged in effort and costings, against providers with a very lightweight methodology. So you need to keep a balance between communicating your awareness of, and provision for, the complexity of the work, without micro-managing the responses. Provision for, and resourcing of, needs analysis and testing should ALWAYS be specified as part of the methodology, even if you do not specify in detail how that should be done.

5.   Too ambitious, having it all!

Taxonomies tend to be required in broad technology areas such as records requirements, document management requirements, search, intranets, portals, and so on. Each application of a taxonomy has specific functions. A taxonomy to support records management has to provide different functionalities compared to a taxonomy for an internet website, or to supporting search in an intranet. Identify the needs specifically and you'll be rewarded with a clearly articulated specs that would serve you well in communicating with all stakeholders and ensuring clearly defined deliverables throughout the project. If you say you want the taxonomy to serve all the needs, then (a) you are showing that you don't really understand the extent to which a taxonomy's purpose guides its design and testing, and (b) you are building a lot of risk into the project.

6.   Understand business and user needs

Be sure to cater to obtaining the needs of the users and have a clear alignment with business needs. Nothing's worse than a project driven solely by a technology shopping list, or based on very high level assumptions about the required search needs. Understand the specific business goals of the taxonomy and search project, and the specific target user pain points and opportunities around search, and if not yet done, cater for these requirements to be collected and translated as part of the needs to be fulfilled. Without this focus, the technology folks will create a shopping list of "nice things to have just in case they are needed" and you'll end up with a huge confusing system that is too expensive, complex to use, and complex to manage and maintain. In fact, if you are looking for a new system, don't decide your technology requirements until the taxonomy and search functionality has been defined and tested - because these will help to sharpen the technology requirements you will write.

7.   Map your technology landscape

Make sure you take account of the various IT systems that may need to consume or could benefit from the taxonomy and search project. Also make sure you track and liaise with other related projects that may have an impact on yours, or that may be engaging users and collecting data on needs that you can re-use instead of repeating the effort.

8.   Get the right commitment from the right persons

Ensure you've identified personnel with sufficient knowledge of the issues faced in day to day operational issues (you'll need an understanding of typical work tasks), as well as somebody with sufficient authority for decision making. Make sure you have sufficient skills and knowledge about search and taxonomy on the team, and if you don't have them, get them in, through recruitment, or consultants. If you do hire consultants, make knowledge and skills transfer to your team a requirement of the project. You'll need to provide for the immediate project team as well as stakeholders to be involved in needs analysis, testing, communications and change management. Once identified, ensure commitment to the process for the project e.g. time put aside to accomplish project tasks, sending the right people, not just the people who happen to be "free". If the right people don't come, be prepared to do arm-twisting. This also implies the need for a strong Sponsor to champion the project throughout its duration.

9.   Get the commitment for an evidence-based approach

Taxonomy and search projects are often vulnerable to "HIPPOS" (Highly Paid Person's Opinion) - and this can sidestep all your painstaking needs analysis and testing work. Get commitment at the most senior levels to a clear methodology and decision-making and design process based on evidence and testing. This won't stop powerful people weighing in late in the process with their strongly felt, but unfounded opinions, but it will enable you to say "thanks for your input, we will check against the needs analysis and if it

looks consistent we'll put your ideas through a round of testing to see how it compares with the current design".

DURING

1. <u>Don't just allocate whoever is 'Free'!</u>

Selecting the right people for the needs analysis and testing activities is paramount as they should understand current processes and also how improvements to process could be done. Persons involved would also be representing the users and hence need to have credibility - e.g. be well respected, have seniority and in depth understanding of current processes.

2. <u>People in the project need to act correctly!</u>
Roles need to be defined clearly, setting realistic expectations ranging from time commitment expected and decisions that key personnel would be tasked to make. If for example Sponsors do not have the right to sign off on the deliverable, then this authority needs to be defined before the start of the project, to avoid delays down the line. Some organisations prefer a committee approach to decision making. Whatever the case might be, realistic timelines need to be factored in.

3. <u>People's time is important</u>

Projects need to be managed judiciously. Project meetings need to have clearly articulated agendas, and project participants need clear start and end dates. This is to ensure projects don't overrun, participants don't lose interest or priorities shift. Respect people's time. Update meetings to sponsors and senior management should be clearly spelt out (at key milestones) and agreed upon up front to avoid having update meetings for the sake of it. Always have a purpose behind every communication (e.g. awareness for coordination purposes, decision or action).

4. Project scoping should be disciplined

It's easy to get distracted and lose focus! Taxonomy and search projects tend to rely on two aspects, the tacit as well as the explicit. For tacit, it's the key persons to be involved, while for the explicit, availability of relevant information shapes the outcome. Selecting unrepresentative people or too small a sample size might limit the credibility and applicability of the end outcome. Beware of also following new-fangled (IT) features and investing too much time exploring how best to make it work if it's not directly linked to business and user needs. Tie such explorations directly to a user requirement to know if it's worthwhile. Milestones or KPIs of the project scoped in the beginning should also be adhered to and regularly checked to ensure the project is proceeding as scoped. This doesn't mean you should not be flexible and adaptive. You might well learn new things about the real needs as you go through the process. But stay focused on delivering business and user benefits, and avoid scope drift, even if people suddenly get enthusiastic about what the new system can achieve. If you haven't scoped the effort for something new, then you either have to cut something back, or schedule it for a later phase. Be prepared to say "no" or "later" or "what should be cut if we want to do this?" to new requests.

5. Always test the outcomes

It may seem obvious, but there's a strong tendency to overlook this, and to assume you can proceed on strong opinions from minority users, or a strongly held assumption that is unquestioned. Testing the taxonomy / search should see it being used by the real users in realistic tasks and then fine-tuned for an optimised experience. Check with your vendor on how they run their testing processes and ask for details of the test plan.

6. Document the user inputs and design decisions

Part of using an evidence-based approach is that your design decisions should have a clear rationale. Document them, and this makes them defensible later on. It also helps the team who will be doing the ongoing maintenance to understand the rationale of key design decisions, and how they are substantiated. Document the key inputs from your users as well. Sometimes they will be in conflict, and you have to balance competing agendas. Keeping records will help you go back to them with explanations for why the design ends up the way it does.

7. Consider whether you need a Taxonomy Management System

If it seems clear that your taxonomy and search will be serving multiple platforms, then consider whether you need a central taxonomy management system to supply the controlled vocabulary needs to these systems. The more complex your taxonomy and its applications are, the more likely it is that you will make mistakes in maintaining it manually. A taxonomy management system will help you govern it consistently and ensure that it is being used as intended, and consistently across the various platforms.

AFTER

1. The project does not end with system roll out.

Governance and maintenance of your taxonomy, and ongoing tuning of search, are key to the ongoing usefulness of your work. Provision for this needs to be part of the overall project scope. Post project, the worst thing that can happen is that it's just handed over with no documentation or guidance as to what's next. Ideally, maintenance processes to, for example, harvest search terms, collect feedback, and housekeep the taxonomy should be stated up front with relevant supporting policies and departments /

persons in charge proposed and agreed upon. Once that is in place, the project can be transitioned to steady state ongoing management with appropriate staffing.

2.   Don't decentralise management of the taxonomy

Any enterprise taxonomy needs to be centrally governed. This is to avoid different stakeholders "colonising" parts of the taxonomy, and building up their own inconsistent, duplicative, or special purposes taxonomy areas without regard for the overall business and user needs, that have been carefully balanced in the initial design. In large scale enterprise taxonomies, it is certainly possible that parts of the taxonomy are delegated out, but these managers are all working to a consistent governance and testing framework, checking for consistency against goals, and checking for inconsistencies.

3.   Project documentation needs to be rigorous and ongoing

Decisions made throughout the project need to be captured and easily referenced for teams taking over the operationalisation of the project. This is where the documentation in the design process comes in. There are many decisions made in the development phase that are nuanced and where judgments are made based on evidence. These need to be clearly understood by the ongoing team so that decisions on taxonomy design are passed on and not just overturned without careful consideration of the implications. Proper documentation is also a means to address loss of knowledge via staff movement.

4.   Continue to track performance, usage and benefits

After roll-out, you will need to track how the taxonomy and search are being used. You will learn from user behaviours how to continue tuning the taxonomy and search. For example, if areas of the taxonomy are

under-populated, it suggests that these areas are not relevant. If some areas are over-populated, it suggests that section of the taxonomy should be expanded. If you notice search queries that are not captured in the taxonomy, it suggests candidates for revision.

These guidelines were developed from an ISKO Singapore workshop *"[Taxonomy and Search Disasters - and how to avoid them](#)"* conducted 25 August 2017. We thank the participants for their inputs and participation.

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