Taxonomy

Information Leadership

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Overview

Many organisations have document management systems where staff struggle to find the information they are looking for. This is a major challenge when designing a new system. Often people will just want a Google search box but this isn't very useful because it gives too many results. What people really need is a way to find specific documents quickly

... Enter, the taxonomy.

What is a taxonomy?

The taxonomy is a structure that helps describe what a document is about. It helps businesses organise documents so that they can be found quickly and managed over time.

The taxonomy provides a consistent filing structure across the whole organisation. This makes it easier for people to save documents in the right place so that they can easily be found later.

How does the taxonomy do this?

It provides context for a document by clearly identifying which business activity led to its creation and other relevant data.

For example, a letter sent to the Health Minister is described as arising from a company's "Board Meeting" activity.

The taxonomy identifies subject matter and other important attributes including:

- **The month and year** the Board meeting was held – "February 2022"
- **The document type** – "Correspondence", and
- **The office** – "Minister of Health"

By using the taxonomy, people have additional context to help them retrieve this letter or others like it in future. For example, people can find correspondence sent by the Board, all interactions with the Minister of Health or choose to only view correspondence that was sent or received.

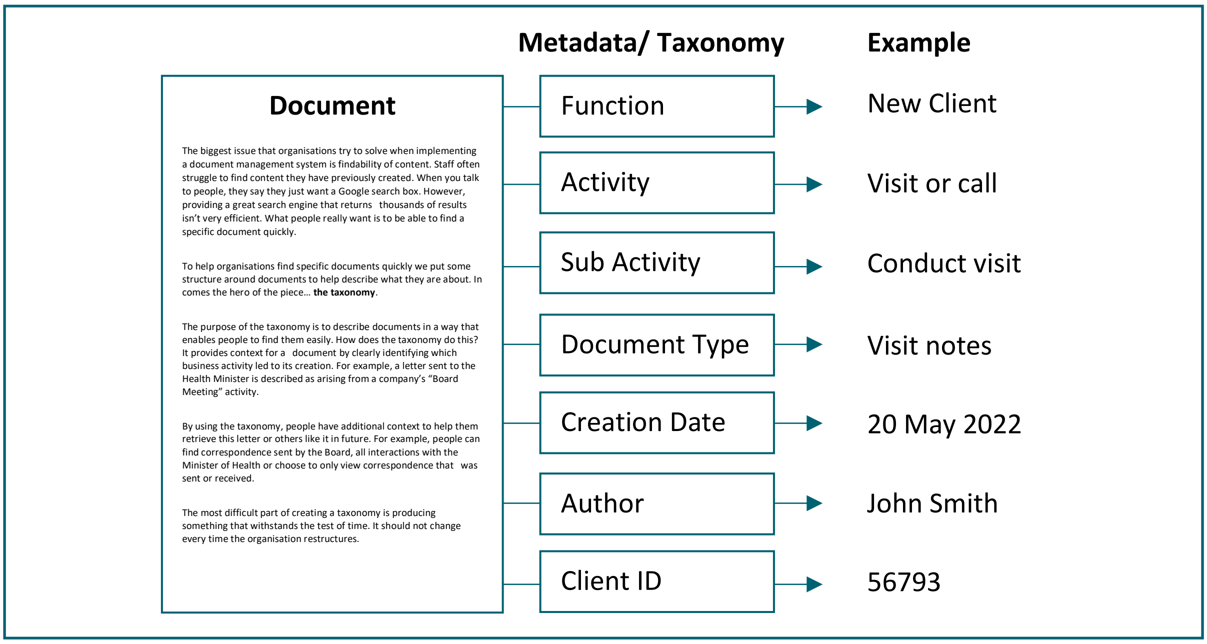


Figure 1 Example of a document being tagged to the function-based taxonomy structure as well as the metadata.

Achieving Information Protection and Compliance with taxonomy

A well-designed taxonomy can support retention & disposal (R&D) efforts by using taxonomy-based rules to apply labels. This means files stored within specific functions, activities and sub-activities can be set to be retained for different periods. For example, financial records may be set to retain for 7 years while building documents are retained for the life of the building. Using the taxonomy, these retention rules can be applied to the different functions.

Taxonomy based R&D rules also prevent unnecessary build-up of clutter. They also reduce risk as once they are deleted, any private, commercial or sensitive information they hold cannot be exposed.

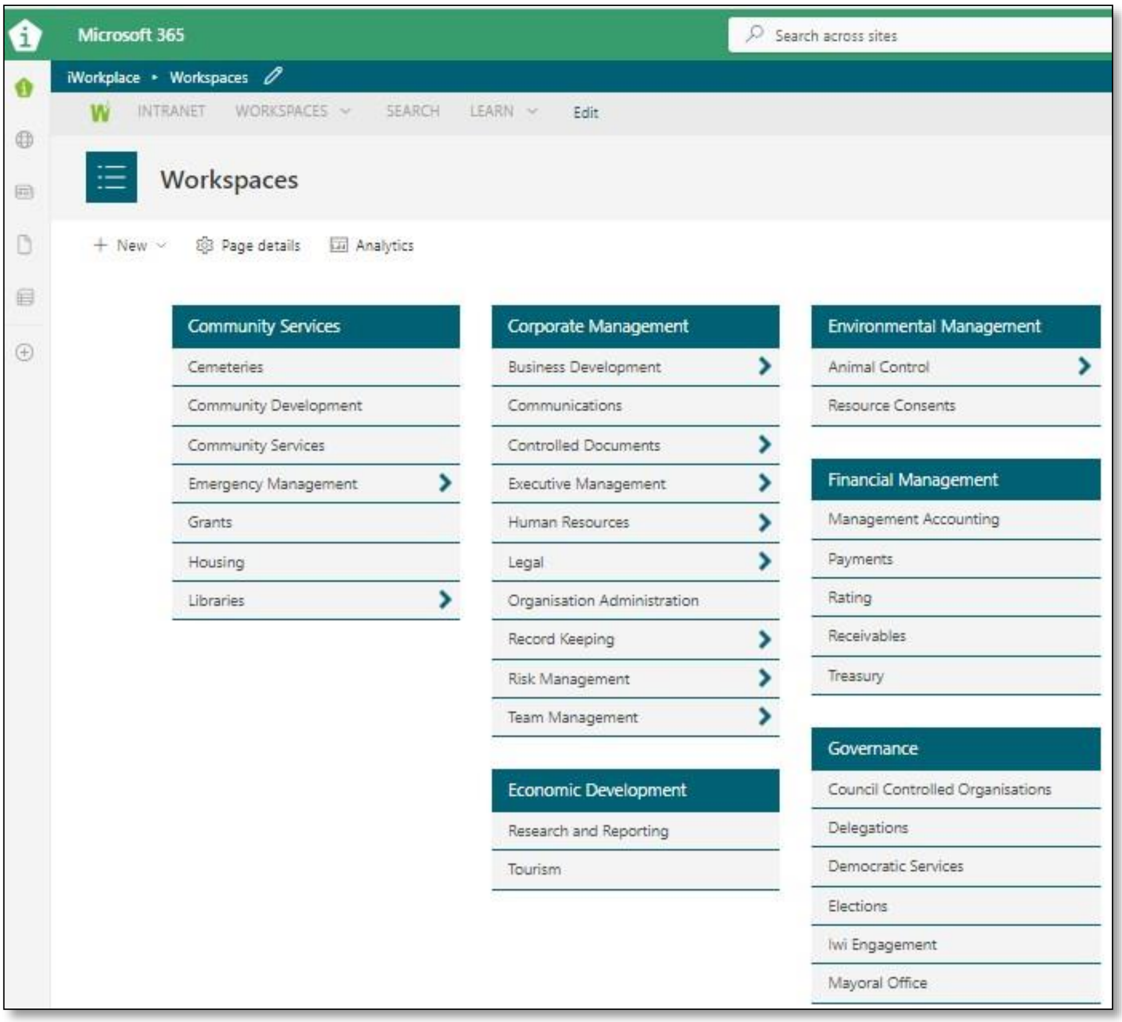
Different activities within an organisation may need different levels of protection which can be applied based on the taxonomy. For example, not everyone needs to have access to personnel files, but they do need access to health and safety files. Permissions can be set at the activity and sub activity level to account for this.

Ordering Microsoft Teams and SharePoint workspaces

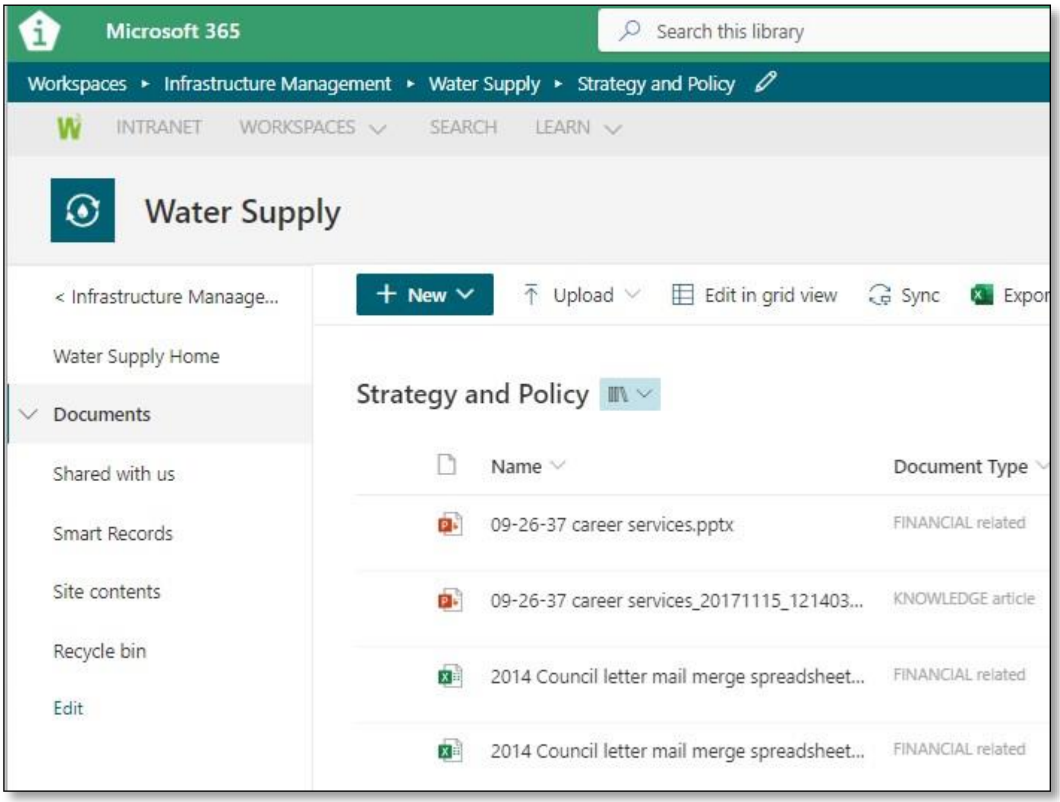
The taxonomy can be used to give order to MS Teams created within an organisation. Using the taxonomy, Teams and/or workspaces can be grouped together by function, activity or sub activity. This can mean hundreds or thousands of these can co-exist and yet information can be easy to find.

Within these Teams, permissions can be set to follow the taxonomy of a particular Team or site.

Here is a Council example of a navigation menu to workspaces based on the taxonomy:



… and a breadcrumb within a team or SharePoint site giving context for the information it holds:



Getting started with taxonomy

The most difficult part of creating a taxonomy is producing something that withstands the test of time. It should not change every time the organisation restructures.

The following five taxonomy tips can help you get your taxonomy planning underway:

1. Make sure your function, activity and sub-activities are action oriented

They should describe the service, activity or actions the organisation performs rather than the topic or subject matter. Often, these are included as activities which makes the taxonomy cumbersome to manage in the future. The subject matter the activities are related to (such as project ID and organisation name) may change over time. Therefore, they are most suited to being identified by metadata or a case file.

2. Avoid identifying too much metadata

Unless these can be automatically collected by the system, people will get annoyed. If there are too many metadata fields when saving a document people are likely to avoid entering optional metadata. In our experience, people will only make the effort to enter quality metadata if they feel it will be of use later. But metadata is only of use if everyone is entering it, otherwise it cannot be relied upon.

3. Avoid embedding document types as sub-activities

Additional context such as 'reports' or 'correspondence' should be captured as metadata, using the document type field. Focus on using sub-activity headings that are descriptive of the activity or action. For example, instead of a sub-activity called "correspondence" use "relationship management" with a case file of "organisation name". This will allow for all content created as part of the relationship with an organisation to be found easily.

4. Don't include trendy names or concept headings in your taxonomy

Terms such as 'caring for our people' instead of 'HR' will lose meaning over time and are not useful for new people. When these names come up during taxonomy interviews, it is important to drill down and explore what this "name" really means. From here the team can seek an agreement on a more generic name for the activity.

5. Your taxonomy does not need to look like your organisational structure

People are familiar with working in a space defined by their organisational structure. It is surprising how often taxonomies look like their organisational structure, despite the fact the taxonomy creator understands this is not what's desired.

People may feel unsettled sharing documents outside their department boundaries. Therefore, it is important to explain to people why creating a taxonomy based on organisational structure is a bad idea. The only exception to the rule is to provide an area for team-based content, such as team meeting minutes.

Implementing a taxonomy

SharePoint Online and Teams no longer display the metadata form when a file is saved. Therefore, the implementation of the taxonomy and metadata requires automation. Below are several ways the taxonomy can be applied to documents:

- Inheritance from the SharePoint hierarchy (sites/libraries)
- Automated inheritance through our Smart Metadata App to sites, libraries and folders
- Templates with metadata attached
- Case files – where the metadata is entered once at the case file level and inherited by the documents within the case file
- Smart Records can infer metadata such as document type from the name of the document or set Retention Labels