Terminology and Bottom-Up Standardization at the US Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Abstract

In standards development, usually stakeholders join an effort to create a standard for satisfying some business requirements. The stakeholders often have developed their own systems but recognize building by adhering to a standard or just reading and writing based on a standard has advantages. In this scenario, business requirements are laid out, best practices identified, and an optimal consensus based solution is constructed. This is typical of top-down development.

Terminology projects on the other hand are almost always developed from the bottom-up. Existing terms are collected and organized. Definitions are developed or modified. At some point common spellings and common meanings are identified. Then, efforts are made to harmonize differences. Similar meanings are often equated and small (gratuitous) differences dropped. Each one spelling is given one meaning (if possible). This is a bottom-up approach.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics is engaged in 3 significant terminology efforts: 1) BLS-wide glossary; 2) A-Z index; and 3) BLS Taxonomy. The glossary and taxonomy projects, in particular, have the potential for uncovering and illustrating areas where standardization will help. But, at first the details peculiar to the source for each term, the program areas, are maintained. After some time, differences illustrated might appear unnecessary or at least a harmonized middle ground reached. This is bottom-up.

The paper contains a discussion of these ideas.