Editorial

E-Commerce

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The Editors are pleased to offer this opportunity for the Associate Editor for E-Commerce to outline the domain, and seek contributions from potential authors.

As our knowledge, experience and ideas broaden and deepen we continually seek new expressions and words to help us share these with others. Many of the new additions to our language are very useful while others can sometimes be confusing and hinder the process of communication and understanding. Most of the latter can be found in the language of business brought about by the rapid and continuing acceleration in the pace of technological advance. For example there are many different definitions of E-Commerce (E-C) and E-Business (E-B) and each tends to focus on a particular set of business activities or a set of technologies. I have witnessed heated and totally unproductive debates as to whether an organisation was engaged in E-Business or E-Commerce. Furthermore, there has been a tendency on the part of some academics, consultants and suppliers to convey the impression that this or that methodology, model or technology will automatically provide benefits. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that some of the new terms that have been introduced and their varied interpretations have tended to confuse business leaders and managers; and, may even have been instrumental in delivering adverse results.

A more helpful view, and one which I share, is that stripped of all the hype, E-B/E-C is simply an extension of the use by organisations of the tools that are available by means of the development of information and communication technologies (ICT). The

consequence is that, as in every other area of human endeavour, the benefits lie not in the inherent properties of the tools themselves but in their use. This sends a far clearer and a more accurate and positive message to organisations as it helps them to focus on the real issue, which is how to make use of the new tools to best advantage.

So what are these new ICT tools? Well, it can be simply stated that they enable individuals and organisations to store vast quantities of data, to rapidly extract, organise and process this data into meaningful information, to transmit this data rapidly over long distances, and to communicate with each other over local and global networks. In the case of E-B/E-C, such data may often involve financial transactions - but it is still data that is being exchanged as there is no physical exchange of money! The overall impact on the organisation and the corresponding benefits or losses will depend on the ability of the organisation to learn how to deploy and use these tools effectively. A further factor is the rapidity with which new technologies are being introduced, which in the space of a few decades has seen us advance from simple stand alone hardwired computers, through main frames, minis, PCs, networks, the internet, email, the worldwide web and now mobile computing and wireless networks. All these pose a number of questions, which include the following.

- What will be the impact of the new tools on the business environment?
- How can the organisation make effective use of these tools in engaging with business partners, customers, employees, suppliers, etc.?

- Are new business models or processes required?
- How do we deal with issues of identity and trust? (eg with whom are we dealing?)
- How do we ensure the security of our information assets and address issues such as hi-tech fraud?
- How can the organisation cope with the continuing developments in the technology?
- Are there any islands of stability in the seas of change?

The next issue of OR Insight is devoted to E-Business and E-Commerce and will include papers that will begin to address some of these questions. These include a longitudinal action research case study, which describes a framework for effectively implementing new ICT tools in a seamless continuous process. It suggests that many of the failures in the development and implementation of ICT systems and processes could have been avoided if a number of simple fundamental issues were addressed. These range from the development of corporate business strategy, through to implementation, and require the use of programme management methods instead of the more frequently adopted methods of project management. Another paper is about programme management. This contains an interesting discussion on the differences between programme and project management and the environments to which they are best suited. One paper draws on the author's extensive experience with organisations in various stages of advancement in relation to the adoption of the new ICT tools. He describes these stages as the six internet states and concludes that "The risk for countries and companies that see themselves falling behind in the "race for e-enablement" is that they see it as a technological, not a managerial race.

I am sure that many of our readers will have some interesting experiences and ideas to share

and papers are invited for future issues of OR Insight on the following areas relating to E-B/E-C: identity (with whom are we dealing?), information management, business intelligence (making sense of the vast quantities of data that can be accumulated), privacy, security, legal requirements in global trading over the internet, the impact of new devices, national and international economies, the movement of labour, society in general. Private and public sector issues will both be of interest, and preference will be given to those papers that include examples and case studies.