



Book review

Handbook on Electronic Commerce

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New books on e-commerce or e-business are still coming onto the market at frequent intervals. However, the business world into which they emerge has seen a sea-change. With the burst of the dot.com bubble, the optimism and gloss of 12 months ago has shifted into, at best, re-evaluation and realism and, at worst, cynicism. To illustrate, a recent inquiry by investment bank Morgan Stanley Dean Witter (quoted in *Computing*, 4 January 2001) reported 'interest in B2B (business-to-business) investment falling by 42% in the last six months' and 'the number of companies *not* wanting a B2B capability' doubling to 32%.

Perhaps this is a pattern to be expected; a period of adjustment akin to the 1980s experience with the personal computer (when they were known as 'micros') or with expert systems, where much investment was wasted. Each technology had to find its real place in the spectrum of ICT capability and contribution to business. With that pattern in mind, the most useful books are likely to be those that present some incisive research, generic reflection or models, rather than those presenting prescriptive 'solutions' which may be transient. Fortunately, this book fits the former of these two descriptions.

Although it makes no statement to the effect, this book has the feel of well-edited proceedings from an eight-stream US conference. The 32 chapters are by selection or permutation from a total of 60 authors (which includes the four editors), 58 of whom are academic. The chapters take the form of free-standing papers, but are grouped within eight parts/themes. These are: The New Era; Consumer Electronic Commerce; Web-based Storefront Design

and Development; Technology and Infrastructure; Business to Business Electronic Commerce; Enterprise Management; Information Services and Digital Products; and Security, Privacy and Legal Issues. Those thematic titles serve to illustrate the diversity of material within the book and thus its strength; subjects range from the future of the digital economy to encryption methods. However, it should be noted that the nature of some of the material takes the book into what might be better referred to as electronic *business*, rather than electronic *commerce*, in particular with regard to the inclusion of enterprise and supply chain management.

However, given its nature, the book has two predictable weaknesses. The first is a lack of cohesion; this is apparent when compared with, say, Timmers (1999). The second is that there are some material omissions; examples of these would be strategy and business models. It is a research text, not one readily useable in teaching, unlike, say, Turban *et al* (2000). However, it *does* contain research foundations for many issues raised, unlike, for example, the more pragmatic Kalakota and Robinson (1999). What diversity has facilitated however, is the useful inclusion of aspects of electronic commerce/business commonly omitted elsewhere, in particular decision support and intelligent agents.

The first edition of this book appeared in 1999 (this is a second printing), in the midst of the optimism regarding the emerging e-economy. In 2001, the other side of the dot.com crash, a more cautious view holds. Nevertheless, issues such as perspectives and frameworks are covered in the book, and overall it offers the reader an opportunity to take a much-needed critical approach to electronic commerce. It is thus a potentially valuable resource for those pursuing business development or research in the field.

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