Knowledge Management and E-Learning
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Knowledge Management and E-Learning is a set of edited papers compiled into four major sections. It combines two distinct fields of study - that of knowledge management and that of e-Learning. The editors believe that this is the first time that such a combination of fields has been studied and thus the book is significant. It also reflects the educational experience of the editors as they work for a university in the US that has found eLearning to be an area of expansion.

There are 19 chapters from 8 countries.

The book begins with a chapter by the overall editors making the link between knowledge management and eLearning. Here they develop the concept that there is synergy between the two fields. In particular they highlight the increasing use of Web 2.0 in the workplace for social networking and its increasing role in distributing knowledge around organizations. Portals to eLearning can come from these KM tools they argue. Indeed the linkage into KM can make eLearning more dynamic as one major argument has been to date, that eLearning is static. The linkage is, they say, the use of learning/knowledge objects - including the goals of re-usability; interoperability; durability; and accessibility.

This book has value to an international audience in academia and KM as, not only are the contributors international, but the use of eLearning is common now across all nations. Distance Learning has now transformed into eLearning and how to improve its usage through the objects described above, must help us all design better eLearning environments.

The arguments put forward are sound in that they are based on the individual authors of each chapter’s own research and study. Naturally academics may wish to argue that for their university the arguments are not valid - as for instance, the students at my own university say frequently that they do not wish to engage in eLearning other than in a minor event, as they chose to study in a face-to-face environment.

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Yet we cannot discount the fact that some form of electronic intervention in all courses is now de rigueur even if only through a Learning Portal or Virtual Learning Environment such as Moodle or BlackBoard. Blended Learning as Heredia and Cantu term it, is common and almost the norm. The learning in these environments is very passive however, and the authors all argue that understanding how we learn and how KM can help in this matter, will enable these environments to become more dynamic and thus more interesting to be involved in.

Computer attitudes and learning styles as discussed by Ho and Lin are of course, extremely important. Many people learn by doing, others by reading and so on, and negative or anxious emotions towards computer based work must affect whether or not virtual learning is the way forward for some students. A positive computer attitude increases the use of computers for knowledge sourcing and learning within organizations as well as by students and thus we should consider our attitudes as organizations towards the use of electronic sources when putting a KM programme in place. Knode and Knode follow this theme on with a chapter looking at how people search, sift and organize information. Currently most organizations, including universities, operate in a self-service mode for the retrieval of information. But how do we choose the right or sufficient or credible information? We have information overload as anyone who has ever used Google can testify. So is it possible to deal with this overload with the use of appropriate technology? Knode and Knode say we can move towards a room-service model if we: employ many search methods and search engines; push rather than pull information; make the information more contextually relevant; make the information real-time. However, this does not strike me as anything new. These arguments have been around for some time but unless we utilize filters and RSS feeds this cannot happen and what if the filters are wrong? Can they find us the Black Swans for instance? The unknown unknowns? These are the key elements of KM for me - find me something I do not know and then I’ll be interested but until then the room-service model is already in use and has its limitations.

Section Three of the book is a set of case studies around performance based learning and knowledge management in the workplace. As such they have interest to those who want to see how other organizations have utilized these tools. For me Chapter 12 was the most interesting as it deals with web-based tools such as blogs; wikis; social bookmarking; and social networking as these are all tools I have encouraged my students to use for many years in my courses. The issue I have is that the chapter does not tell me how to persuade my students to actually use these tools without an incentive such as assessment grades! It seems that for some students these tools are valuable learning aids and for others they are not. ePortfolios are an increasing as discussed in Chapter 13, as students are encouraged to develop their learning reflections and yet they are resisted unless made compulsory, by some students, yet most will happily use FaceBook… and Wikipedia! Lifetime learning can be achieved or recorded by an ePortfolio as the authors Porto and Walti say and can contribute towards a record for future and continuing CPD for employment once begun. Thus we should encourage the use of them as CPD is increasingly relied upon for professional body membership and ePortfolios are becoming a standard method of assessment of this learning.

The final section of the book looks at Industry perspectives. After all it is not only universities that are using eLearning. Virtual Leaders and virtual experts are the main issues discussed here. But the book did not have a summation which I would have found useful. A final word from the editors about what they thought we had learned from the book and what the future trends really are would have helped the end which seemed to be abrupt.

Overall the book is well written and very clear in its arguments. All authors are understandable and make their arguments well.

As mentioned in the beginning of this review, the book is original in its subject matter - in the link between KM and eLearning.
however not all authors make this link explicitly and several just discuss either one of the fields with a nod to the other. I suspect that a set of commissioned papers rather than through what appears to be an open call would have made for a more coherent offering.

I find that this book would be useful for library reference and that some chapters will appeal to people looking at one or other of the aspects of the concepts. Overall this is not a book for general readership for managers or students. It is a reference book and as such has a place in all libraries. This is a topic area that should concern all organizations.

This is not a book I would suggest readers must buy but I would suggest that all libraries seriously consider adding it to their collection.

Elayne Coakes is a senior lecturer in business information management. She has a BA (Pub Admin) from Sheffield Polytechnic, a MSc (information systems), and a PhD (information systems) from Brunel University. Her current research relates to knowledge sharing in organizations. She is an internationally acknowledged expert on sociotechnical thinking and knowledge management. She was a visiting professor in Seville University (Spain), under the government grant scheme for distinguished, international scholars, a visiting research fellow in Queens University (Canada), and a keynote speaker at Manchester University (UK) at the Tribute day for Enid Mumford. As the Vice-Chair of the BCS Sociotechnical Special Group she is active in promoting information systems and has edited three books of international contributions in this field. Since then she has co-authored Beyond Knowledge Management and the Encyclopedia of Communities of Practice in Information and Knowledge Management. Additionally, she has published more than sixty book chapters, peer reviewed journal articles, and conference papers.