I have to confess, my first skim of the contents of this book left me with a profound sense of disappointment. I had been attracted by the sub-title and looked forward to reading about how sociotechnical thinking had implications for knowledge management in the Construction Industry.

I looked at the Index to see where and how it was discussed and found only three references to sociotechnology - one referring to the sociotechnical perspective; one to a sociotechnical solution and one to sociotechnical systems. So I retreated to the Preface (the book has no Introduction) to discover what, if anything, was said there about the sociotechnical perspective. In these pages there are only two mentions of sociotechnical thinking and one of a “blend of both social … and technical interactions” and one of these mentions related to a book chapter summary. Clearly the sociotechnical perspective was more in the promise than in the delivery and substance of this book.

I then scanned the Contents list and proceeded to read Chapter 12 which promised a look at Uncertainty and Information in Construction: From the Socio-Technical Perspective 1962-1966 to Knowledge Management. I set to to read this chapter first. The title however confused me. Why was the sociotechnical perspective so limited in time span? In reading the chapter I discovered that the dates related to a specific Tavistock Institute project undertaken during these years into Building Industry Communications. This research was abstracted comprehensively in the chapter following a brief discussion of the now seminal work by Trist and Bamforth (1951) on the Longwall coal-mining study. The chapter considered the complexities and uncertainty that is an underlying characteristic of construction activity and posits a large number of questions in its conclusions relating to knowledge management and its foundation in sociology and operational research. However, I failed to grasp the time
connection implied in the chapter title and found myself looking for some ‘filling’ in the sandwich between the 1960s and the current discussion on knowledge management. A reliance on the Tavistock Institute to provide this ‘filling’ was not necessarily useful as whilst the Institute clearly helped develop sociotechnical ideas, the concepts and applications have moved on since the 1960s.

Emboldened by my success at finding some sociotechnical discussions to challenge me, even if I disagreed with some of the ideas, I searched further through the eighteen chapters for more discussions on sociotechnical thinking and its application to knowledge management (KM) in construction. I was heartened to see the international basis of the contributions which, as well as contributions from the UK, included contributions from authors from New Zealand, Israel, Hong Kong, Australia, South Africa, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan and the United States. Not forgetting, of course, that the editor is from Finland. Disappointingly though, not many authors were actually currently full-time employed in construction, most being currently employed, at least some of the time, in academic roles (including study) or consultancy.

The chapters were structured in what might term an academic text book style with each beginning with a set of Learning Objectives. They all ended with Practical Tips and Lessons Learned which are useful for both students and construction industry management. The book is divided into three sections. The first section considers KM in Construction Practice; the second, Learning from Experience; and the third covers Emerging Models and Solutions.

Of the seven chapters that comprised the first section, I found that the background discussions to knowledge management tended to be generic and standard rather than targeted to either project management or construction. This is all very widely known and unlikely to hold a reader’s interest unless they are new to the study of knowledge management or intellectual capital (IC). The case study evidence was however, of interest and provided useful examples of knowledge management and IC in practice. In section one I found another chapter (by Fong and Wong this time) that purported to take a sociotechnical perspective. However, this was more implicit than explicit and only briefly referred to at that.

Section two differs from Section one in the amount of theory discussion, with the chapters in Section two being less discursive about generic knowledge management. The five chapters of Section two are on the whole more practically based (apart from Chapter 12 described above) and focus on organisational learning. I was particularly intrigued by the contribution by Ng who wrote about HE and Professional Development in the Construction Industry. Here he looked a module in an undergraduate surveying degree where knowledge management principles
were incorporated into the learning activities. During group discussions a dialog map is constructed and a concept map developed as visual reminders of the knowledge development and its origins. The lessons learnt from working with undergraduate students can be applied to lifelong learning situations and professional development situations, where insights gained through teamwork can be applied to problem solving in the workplace.

The final section of the book considers emerging Models and Solutions. There are six chapters in this section. Here models of knowledge management and knowledge transfer are developed and explored. Chapter fourteen by Whelton, Pennanen and Ballard contains an interesting table detailing the research disciplines that have considered projects and their primary approaches. This table looks at the project definition phase - or the first phase in every project - and summarises neatly the main ideas about what should be contained in the phase of project definition and ways to manage and analyse this phase. The authors acknowledge the complex environment of project management and the issues of emergence which needs to lead to adaptive behaviours from management. Thus learning organisations are considered here again by implication. The connection of adaptive behaviours with self-organising groups (and by implication autonomous or semi-autonomous as is proposed by sociotechnical theory) is made. Many of the system characteristics described in the Conclusions as required to develop collaborative capacity are those already proposed by sociotechnical theory and are in the principles developed by Cherns (1976; 1987). This is proposed here as future research yet all that is required is the reading of existing literature in the field that this book was supposedly exploring.

This chapter sums up my main frustration with the book. If you are looking for a contribution to the knowledge management literature, this book provides an interesting addition, especially if you are working in the Construction Industry. I would strongly recommend that project and knowledge managers in building and construction read this book - it provides a good contribution with strong case studies and interesting ideas. However, if you are interested in a contribution to the sociotechnical literature, you will not find it here. Change the title and delete the sub-title and the book fulfils its purpose. As it stands, it is a disappointment.

REFERENCES

