Special Issue:
Social Aspects of E-Business

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The dust has now settled from the dot.com boom and burst, and the euphoria and pessimism have been replaced by more cool-headed, rational thinking and actions underpinned by robust theories and conceptual frameworks. There are even signs of a steady e-business recovery, and more and more e-businesses have become profitable. The dot.com burst did not mark the end of the Internet and e-business, because the underlying rapid growth of the networked society and economy, in terms of the number of people and organizations getting online and the business volume of e-commerce, for example, have continued even during the economic downturn.

Today businesses from around the globe are actively exploring opportunities and challenges brought about by the Internet and related technologies. This is not only restricted to the private sectors: the public sectors have also been actively shaping the development of infrastructure and services, and experimenting with new ways of delivering their own information and services via electronic channels. Indeed, the boundaries between sectors, products, services, channels, and companies are increasingly eroded. In the next few years, the success and failure of many private- and public-sector organizations will depend critically on how effective they are in implementing new ways of working, by innovatively exploiting new capabilities afforded by the Internet and related technologies.

In understanding and implementing such radical changes, the need for theoretical guidance is both real and urgent. However, unlike many other business management subjects such as strategy, marketing, or human resource management, e-business is an emerging area where most scholars have entered the field from other, more established areas. The views people hold on critical issues are often divergent and sometimes incoherent. This has created a serious problem for researchers and practitioners alike, as the ground on which new ideas and new business activities are created is still very shaky.

Moreover, the development of e-business is shaped by a whole plethora of social forces, which in turn are leading to profound social changes. A systematic investigation of such issues will have significant implications for theory, practice, and policy. This special issue is our first attempt to make some preliminary inroad in addressing the vast range of complex issues on the social aspects of e-business. The idea was first debated at the British Academy of Management (BAM) Annual Conference in 2003 in the E-Business and Technology Management track. Subsequently, a new call for
papers was distributed. The central focus of the special issue is on theoretically and empirically based research addressing: (1) the social shaping and social implications of e-business and e-commerce, and (2) the applications of e-business technologies in public services and non-business activities. The call for papers attracted enormous interest from scholars around the world; and after a stringent blind refereeing process, six papers were selected for publication in this issue. The articles address a wide range of issues, from e-books, e-learning, and e-marketing, to new frameworks for understanding e-business failure and Web usability, and to issues surrounding the digital divide.

Norshuhada Shiratuddin, in her article “E-Books in Higher Education: Technology, E-Marketing Prospects, and Pricing Strategy,” describes an ongoing project on the use of e-books in a higher education institution. It starts with a discussion on the diversity of e-book definitions, and is followed by its advantages and associated technologies. The article then makes comparisons between different formats currently used for e-books, and illustrates where e-books can be acquired and purchased, the electronic publishing process, and the different e-book compilers. The article also highlights the idea of marketing e-books electronically to improve accessibility, as well as different ways that lecturers can market their publications. Finally, a formula for pricing e-book based on student attitude is proposed.

David Barnes, Matthew Hinton, and Suzanne Mieczkowska investigate “Enhancing Customer Service Operations in E-Business: The Emotional Dimension.” They argue that in today’s increasingly competitive markets, greater emphasis is being placed on customer service as a means of achieving competitive advantage. Many organizations believe that e-business can provide opportunities to improve customer service operations by enabling them to get closer to the customer and enhance the organization-to-customer contact experience. However, use of the Internet fundamentally changes the nature of the customer contact experience. This article investigates this phenomenon from an operations management perspective. It concludes that unless the emotional aspects of customer service are considered alongside the functional, then barriers to enhanced customer service in e-business will not be overcome.

Minh Q. Huynh, in his article on Viewing E-Learning Productivity from the Perspective of Habermas’ Cognitive Interests Theory, argues that educators today face an important challenge of how to define e-learning productivity. This article draws on Habermas’ Cognitive Interests Theory as the conceptual foundation and proposes a framework for e-learning productivity. The common notion of e-learning productivity often focuses mainly on instrumental objectives that are measured in terms of higher achievement, better test scores, more satisfaction, or less cost. However, this article argues that the notion of e-learning productivity should also encompass the aspects of reaching common understanding; building team consensus; and achieving critical reflection, self-actualization, and emancipation from constraints, because all of these are relevant in today’s learning environment.

Shahizan Hassan and I present a new framework for “Evaluating the Usability and Content Usefulness of Web Sites: A Benchmarking Approach.” We argue that although the benchmarking technique has been widely used in various aspects of organizations and businesses, there is no clear framework on how the technique can be applied for Web evaluation. Our research identified a total of 46 criteria that can be used as the benchmarking metrics. The framework was then tested for its applicability by evaluating four political Web sites in Malaysia. The results prove that the frame-
work is easy to use and would be particularly valuable for those who intend to benchmark the overall usability and content usefulness of their Web sites against those of their competitors.

Anil M. Pandya and Nikhilesh Dholakia, in their article on “B2C Failures: Toward an Innovation Theory Framework,” use concepts derived from the investigation of product and services innovation failures to develop a strategic market framework to help understand why so many Internet-based business-to-consumer (B2C) companies failed to fulfill their initial promise. B2C crashes, viewed collectively, may be seen as representing an initial wave of failure of an entirely new class of technology-driven services. Such services sought to inform, promote, sell, and deliver B2C items in radically unfamiliar ways. Research shows that B2C firms failed because they did not follow time-tested business precepts, but it does not tell us why. In addressing this question, this article argues that unsuccessful B2C firms failed to realize they were marketing innovative services. By focusing on the difficulties of marketing innovative services, the authors develop an integrated framework using the continuum of need-solution context in conjunction with the notion that seller/buyer perceptions about the scope of innovations are not necessarily concordant. Matched perceptions can lead to success, but not always, because sellers and buyers can both misjudge the nature and scope of an innovation. Using secondary sources, the article illustrates the explanatory power of the framework and clarifies why, despite resource availability, most B2C firms failed in the initial round.

The final article, “Socializing the Digital Divide: Implications for ICTs and E-Business Development,” Audley Genus and Mohd Ali Mohamad Nor define digital divide as a phenomenon associated with disparities between groups and societies in the adoption and diffusion of electronic information and communications technology (ICT) and e-business practice. The article argues that, in rhetoric at least, the innovation, adoption, and diffusion of ICTs bear the hallmark of technological determinism (i.e., that of a technical imperative) in which social, economic, and political factors are underplayed. By way of contrast, the article considers the merit of a social shaping approach to analyzing innovation in ICTs, to assess the prospects for ameliorating the digital divide between developed and developing countries, and for stimulating economic development in the latter through the promotion of e-business.

Many people provided useful help during the preparation and production of this special issue. First of all I would like to thank all authors who submitted papers for this special issue — not only the authors whose papers have been selected, but also all other authors who submitted papers. Due to the limited volume of the journal, I had to make some tough decisions to exclude several interesting papers. However, I am also planning an edited book in the near future along the same theme, which will provide more space to incorporate a greater number of papers in one volume — including new contributions (so if anyone is interested in contributing to the book, please e-mail me at Feng.li@ncl.ac.uk) — and explore a broader range of issues in more detail.

Due to the large number of submissions received, reviewing all the papers is no trivial task. I would like to thank everyone who helped with the review process. Without their timely effort and constructive criticisms, this special issue would not have been possible. Unfortunately I am unable to thank each of them individually here due to the large number of people involved, but their support is greatly appreciated.

Mehdi Khosrow-Pour, Editor-in-Chief, and Jan Travers, Senior Managing Editor,
have been extremely helpful in their usual friendly and organized manner. They provided valuable assistance and practical guidance throughout different stages, and made the entire process relatively painless for me, for which I am very grateful.

I hope you will find this special issue informative, thought-provoking, theoretically challenging, and practically useful. This is still a rapidly evolving area, and more research is clearly needed. We welcome any comments, feedback, suggestions, and constructive criticisms.

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