This book commences without an introduction that should have been dedicated to laying out the overall aims of the book, presumably to offer companies (and students of business administration and related subjects) a clear picture and pathway for addressing sustainability issues where they are concerned. After presenting the concept of sustainability in the first chapter, the second aims to lay the strategic foundation for sustainability in business enterprise. The third and fourth chapters, one on the culture shift that firms face when engaging in sustainability, and the other on how to elaborate a business plan pertaining to sustainability projects, complete the basis on which the following five chapters build. They roughly follow a functions approach of the firm, with chapters on sustainable supply chain management, green marketing, sustainability reporting, finance, and accounting. The tenth chapter is devoted to sustainable consumption, and the last chapter, as a sort of outlook, to footprint analysis, a tool that Ms. Khalili sees used in the long run by businesses aiming for sustainability.

There was also a feeling of unease having read the cover information that this single authored book (according to the cover and the bibliographical reference) is, in fact, an edited volume of eleven chapters, of which the author wrote four and co-wrote three others. Well, at least, one may expect a higher degree of coordination, leading to a more coherent publication than is often apparent for edited volumes.

The first chapter contains already a regrettable theoretical shortcut, the social dimension of sustainability, very often expressed as intragenerational and intergenerational equity. Emphasising as the most important objective of (business) sustainability preserving the
continuing supply of resources for business operations misses the entire point of the concept of sustainable development, a “...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (the famous ‘Brundtland definition’). What is important in this chapter is the mentioning of the IPAT (Please insert full) equation that should have given much more food for thought for the book’s ensuing chapters, notably chapter 10 on sustainable consumption.

Concentrating on the firm, the second chapter tries to translate the concept of sustainable development in business terms. What emerges here is a too narrow focus on the production side of products and services, on technologies, focusing solely on the environmental dimension of sustainable development. The groundbreaking developments in ICT (Please insert full) that led to the stakeholder perspective and its profound importance for business sustainability are not discussed. It is this part of the social dimension, though, that will impact on many companies to take note and change tack, bringing together corporate strategy and sustainability. There are a number of instances that exemplify how sustainable development impacts on corporate strategy via a company’s stakeholders. A discussion of the increasingly important role of stakeholder panels and companies’ experiences with these would have been in order.

A chapter with BP as the main subject and reporting the company’s activities in a positive light without mention of the oil spill of April 2010 suggests that this book was already outdated before publication. Most of this chapter – on the role of culture for business sustainability – can be seen as a standard textbook rehash on culture (without the link to sustainability). The references to companies to illustrate the text are one-paragraph descriptions that do not underscore the important role that a culture shift can play in organisational sustainability.

Stating ‘the business case for sustainability’ is, one would imagine, a visionary, exhilarating and upbeat exercise. Not so for the book’s fourth chapter: the dry checklist does not convey a vision or a passion (that business leaders like Ray Anderson of Interface live and transmit). For inspiration as to how to get inspired by new approaches and new business models for sustainability, one suggestion would be instead to turn to the book titled Natural Capitalism, by Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins and already published in 2000.

Supply chain management is rightly viewed as a cornerstone in achieving business sustainability; however, here the reader is treated to the static version. The most important question, ‘What is the product’s/service’s final function for the end consumer?’ is not posed, and thus its ramifications on the redesign of entire supply chains from their end is not discussed such as, reconception of products as services.

What has industrial ecology to do in a chapter on green marketing? As a researcher in the first discipline, this reviewer can only regret that the cornerstone of the sixth chapter, Figure 6.1, linking green marketing with industrial ecology and environmental justice, is not explained at all, and thus, its significance incoherent. Another significant point for this chapter is its omission of the link of green marketing (in the proper sense) with sustainable consumption, thus reducing green marketing to a form of simple advertising, with which marketers would take issue.

The seventh chapter on methods of measurement and reporting, unfortunately, is another testimony to the book’s muddled structure: half of its content has no place in a chapter that should have focused on the firm level of sustainability measurement and reporting, its perspectives and problems.

There is also a chapter on ‘the finance of sustainability’ without mention of socially responsible investment (SRI) This omission is all the more blatant as SRI has been clearly flourishing for the last fifteen years or so, in terms of funds invested, and also as a research topic. Discussion of SRI’s different screening strategies can only be regarded as a must for any discussion on sustainable finance and investment. Furthermore, contrary to what is stated in the chapter, the Australian government did indeed ratify the Kyoto protocol (already...
in December 2007), and the European Union is comprised of 27 members (instead of the 25 stated). The choice of Goldman Sachs as representative of sustainable finance is injudicious in the light of the banking crisis of the last four years, and that company’s well-publicised practices to the contrary.

This reviewer found the ninth chapter on sustainability accounting and reporting a welcome departure from the remainder of the book: its clear writing style and structure (the first three pages of the section ‘Corporate sustainability’ (although it might have been better placed in chapter two) directs the reader’s interest towards ratio analysis, especially Dupont ratio’s use for management accounting for sustainability purposes. This idea has a lot of merit, and it would be interesting to read instances of the experience of companies that have utilised the ratio, instead of being the subject of a theoretical discussion, a sort of ‘thought experiment.’

The ensuing chapter on ‘sustainable consumption’ does not refer to consumption issues at all. The discussion is wholly product-centred, not needs-centred, as would have befitted a proper discussion of the subject. The assertion that green labels may be considered greenwashing by consumers is standing truth on its head: it is precisely the creation of credible labels, audited and underwritten by organisations with an impeccable reputation that is the best strategy against greenwashing. There are some dodgy “green” labels, but these are a tiny minority that should not be used to drag down legitimate efforts in labelling.

Positioning ecological, carbon and water footprints as the future yardstick for corporate sustainability efforts is a good idea that is already being put into practice by some European companies, such as, carbon footprint for groceries. What would have been necessary for this chapter to reflect current academic insight is a discussion on the role of international trade for importing/exporting ecological, carbon or water footprints.

What stands out after having read the book is the author’s (or authors’) inability to join the dots, as it were. For instance, the concept of Factor X (4 or 10), as presented in chapter 1, is not coherent with the author’s view on sustainable consumption, which she explains, is neither about consuming less nor consuming differently, compared to the current supposedly unsustainable consumption patterns. Another is the social dimension of sustainability which was referred to as ‘environmental sustainability’ in the first chapter’s discussion of sustainable development, only to make another appearance in the tenth chapter. This lack of an overall theoretical coordination is all the more astounding as all the contributors are clearly connected to one another and to the author’s academic institution.

There is no vision, no inspiration to be found, and above all, a minimising of the seriousness of the issues and the writing style is stilted.

Concluding, this reviewer is fully aware that the current political climate in the US with respect to topics like ‘the environment’ or ‘climate change’ might contribute to having to discuss these questions with much circumspection within the business community. Even so, one would be hard pressed to see a market for the book in the US and even less so in Europe. There are just so many books on the subject already out (and more forthcoming) that are much better, more practical, more inspiring, or even, academically sound.