A whole encyclopedia devoted to knowledge management (KM)! Who would have thought this possible a few decades back when the subject was first developed? What a great distance we have all traveled since then. Back then if someone would have predicted such a venture I’m sure much laughter would have ensued. I, myself, would have been astounded. And yet, here we are with just such a venture. I think it can be safely stated that when a field of study reaches a point when such a product is produced, it has truly arrived and can no longer be thought of as a fad or management fashion. We have reached just this point.

It might be of value to readers of this foreword to stop for a moment and consider where knowledge management came from—intellectually and in practice and how it evolved from a collection of disparate insights and models from several disciplines into a reasonably coherent subject that can have an entire encyclopedia be devoted to it.

In the realm of theory there were several social science disciplines that were the foundation of the subject, economics may have been the most important of these. Economists had been looking at the subject of knowledge as long ago as Adam Smith in the 18th century—the division of labor being, after all, a knowledge-based concept. The great Victorian economist, Alfred Marshall, wrote about knowledge often being the basis for firm location and clustering. More recently economists during World War II began measuring how long it took to build a combat plane, and then how long it took to build the second and third plane. This early focus on learning-by-doing proved to have a significant influence on subsequent knowledge studies. The contemporary emphasis on evolutionary economics, behavioral economics, and the economics of information, have all emphasized the role of knowledge as has many areas of development economics.

Sociology, too, offered many insights. The current fascination of networks and knowledge derives from sociological tools developed in the past forty years. The interest in communities of practice is strongly influenced by sociological analysis and methods. Trust, too, falls into the category of sociology and is proving a very durable way of understanding why knowledge is effective (or not) in organizations and nations. In fact, the whole movement that emphasizes knowledge as a social phenomenon is a function of much social theory and analysis.

Philosophy has given us at least two critical thinkers for us to digest and reflect on, Michael Polanyi (originally a chemist) and Gilbert Ryle. It can even be argued that Aristotle and Plato play behind the field roles that still influence what we say about knowledge.

The fields of computer science have given us much to think and work with. Artificial intelligence may not have lived up to all its hype, but it had a very strong role in stimulating thought on what knowledge can and can not be modeled that is still being debated. There are also some applications that can truly said to be knowledge-based. The same can be said for expert systems. Cognitive science, especially when it is applied to system thinking, has also proven to be a powerful stimulant with great potential for understanding and modeling knowledge.

Of course, management and business scholars have often taken the lead in the field, synthesizing some of the work mentioned above, as well as developing theories, cases, approaches, proscriptions that can be applied fairly easily by actual knowledge practitioners at work. Often this work was influenced in turn by several earlier management trends, especially information management, the quality movement, and re-engineering. The need for business schools to develop cases for teaching the growing number of KM classes has also spurred practical research into how the theory looks and works out when actually implemented in an organization.

Reviewing the contents of this encyclopedia, I am struck by the diverse and eclectic nature of the field as well as how much convergence and coherence has emerged in such a short time. This volume manages to deal with virtually every aspect of the field without becoming some huge unwieldy black box of a thing focused on data, information, knowledge and everything else under the sun. It is fascinating to see just how much agreement there exists amongst researchers and practitioners as to what KM is, what are its component pieces and core processes, and what are the drivers and mechanisms that make it work.
There is no doubt in my mind that knowledge will only grow in the coming decades as a source of wealth throughout the world economy. The various forms of knowledge—from an individual speculating at her desk to a patent or embedded practice—will gain in value and subsequently gain in management attention and focus. More and more organizations and countries are focusing on knowledge as bedrock of their policy. This volume should provide all of these pioneers with an essential reference source for ideas as to what needs to be addressed and what we have learned about the subject over the past few decades.

Laurence Prusak  
Distinguished Scholar, Babson College, USA