Foreword

This book can be regarded as philosophical in talking about ontologies for business interaction, but, as I will argue, it is a rather practical book as well, impacting effectiveness in business interaction and information systems design. First I will just say a few words about myself so that you get an idea of this person advising you to spend time with this book.

To be honest, I myself do not talk so much about ontology because the classical concept of ontology refers to an idea that we can know about the basic structure, relations, and functions of the world: the ontology. In connection to that, we assumedly can also use clever strategies to reach this knowledge, epistemologies.

My thesis is that we all have different views of the world around us and that these views are partly manifested in language to describe, reflect, and act in the world. As humans we can also codesign such views and agree upon them as “views in action,” making it possible for us to both communicate and act in new ways. Implementing these views in computer applications reinforces the power of human action many times. That is why it is so important to reflect upon the process of finding and using the best possible views or ontologies. And that is what the book is about.

In the book there are discussions that range from high-level ontologies that cover the whole idea of business and business development to specific areas and application domains. Inspired by that, I would like to take a “high-level” example to show the importance of this book.

We can use different ontologies on what constitutes a living human being. The two most well-known ontologies are hearth death and brain death. If we use the brain death ontology, it will open up a whole new business area with new options, dilemmas, and problems for a lot of people.

We can also be sure that the brain death ontology will evolve over time. We want to be absolutely sure that a person who has been declared dead will not become alive again, but we also want to make use of all the possibilities regarding transplantation and research that arise when a person is dead. Therefore, specialized domain ontologies are developed for different types of transplantations.

In all these cases, the ontology serves as the basis for the development of instruments and routines that include computing resources to a high degree. In other words, the ontology is the fundament that allows us to both communicate in the domain of specialized transplantations and to develop computer applications supporting successful transplantations.

This was a top-level general example of life and death. But the same principles do apply in all businesses and organizations. Ontologies are the backbone of new innovations and services, as many of the articles in this book describe.

As some of the chapters indicate, there is an even more important aspect of ontologies that has to be mentioned. In most cases the suggested solutions manifested as computer applications and work routines will not serve the intended outcome if the people involved are not involved in the process. Often we talk about this challenge as user participation or requirements management but, as you can see by reading this book, ontologies play a fundamental role even in this context.

Let us go back to the transplantation case. If people cannot trust the acting ontology, they will not sign agreements for transplantation and the whole idea will fail. It is, therefore, important that the ontology is translated into ordinary language so that people can have a chance to feel safe with the acting ontology.
This challenge is very fundamental and causes a lot of problems in development projects in many organizations and businesses. In this book we can find clues to successfully handling this challenge with the help of metaphors. That is the art of using existing languages when discussing new phenomena. This is an advanced task but of crucial importance if new ontologies are going to have positive impact on human life. This book gives some advice in this direction and my estimation is that we will find a lot more research about this in the future. May be it will not just be a question of life and death for business ideas but also for civilizations.

Olov Forsgren
University College of Borås, Sweden