Editorial

Knowledge management is a topic that has attracted a great deal of interest over the past few years, not only in the Information Systems field, but also in areas such as organisational learning, human resource management, innovation and strategic management. The term knowledge management was in fact coined by Karl Wiig as long ago as 1986, but it was not until the second half of the 1990s that large numbers of publications on the topic began to appear. As with several other topics within information systems, especially those that have also reached ‘fad’ status, there has been considerable pressure from software vendors and associated consultancies to view problems of knowledge management as being amenable to purely technological ‘solutions’. Fortunately, this pressure has been balanced by appeals from practitioners and academics to concentrate on the human and organisational issues in managing knowledge, rather than the technology. However, the success of these appeals has led some people to question what Information Systems as a discipline can contribute to knowledge management, especially those who view Information Systems as dealing mainly with ‘hard’ rather than ‘soft’ issues.

This issue of the European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS) is a special one, comprising five papers selected from those originally presented at KMAC2000 Knowledge Management Beyond the Hype: Looking Towards the New Millennium, a conference sponsored by the Operational Research Society and held at Aston University, Birmingham, UK on July 17th and 18th, 2000. The KMAC2000 conference attracted delegates from 16 countries, of whom around 30% were practitioners, making for a very healthy interchange of ideas.

The lead paper in the issue is by George Huber, examining the ‘Transfer of Knowledge in Knowledge Management Systems’, which is very much concerned with the human/organisational/technological balance mentioned in the opening paragraph here. Huber looks particularly at the motivational issues involved, both in the adoption of knowledge management systems and in their continuing use. He raises a set of eight questions, intended not only as a research agenda for academics, but also for practitioners, ‘to provoke thinking and debate about what their organization ought to be doing to facilitate transfer of knowledge’.

The second paper, ‘What is Knowledge and can it be Managed?’ presents a different but complementary perspective on how the structures and procedures of an organisation are related to knowledge (and vice versa), from David Sutton, an independent consultant. Sutton discusses the extent to which knowledge can be codified, and reflects on the crucial role of people as ‘critical elements in any knowledge management system’.

The third paper, by Helena Karsten, Kalle Lyytinen, Markku Hurskainen and Timo Koskelainen, is entitled ‘Crossing Boundaries and Conscripting Participation: Representing and Integrating Knowledge in a Paper Machinery Project’. This uses the example of Valmet, the largest paper machinery supplier in the world, to establish the value of the two concept pairs: boundary object/perspective taking and conscription device/perspective making, in knowledge representation and integration. Discussion focuses particularly on the role of the technical specification document, including the IT support possibilities.

The fourth paper, by Nick Marshall and Tim Brady, again goes beyond the technical aspects of IT in knowledge management, this time to bring in ‘the politics of knowledge’. Their discussion of the relationship between these issues is illustrated by example case studies from complex products and systems.

Finally, the paper by Dave Randall, John Hughes, Jon O’Brien, Mark Rouncefield and Peter Tolmie looks at systems to support ‘organisational memory’, both from the academic and practical points of view. They examine in detail a case example from the banking sector, where much of the organisational memory was represented by the intriguing mnemonic ‘CAMPARI & ICE’.

We hope the range of material demonstrated by these papers will stimulate interest in and contributions on knowledge management, both to EJIS and the provisionally planned second KMAC conference, KMAC2003.

John Edwards