

Developing competitive intelligence in the knowledge-based organisation

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Introduction

In order for organisations to remain globally competitive, new tools for decision-making are required. Of these tools, it is internationally recognised that Competitive Intelligence (CI) is fast becoming a norm rather than the exception to assist management with decision-making in the modern knowledge-based organisation.

The purpose of competitive intelligence in the organisation is to support and lead to management decisions and action. Pistorius (2001:97) argues that the prosperity (and competitiveness) of organisations depend on their capacity to innovate. There exist a clear and concise link between competitiveness and the process of innovation. Innovation depends on a number of factors for success. Of these factors, information and intelligence are believed to be primary drivers.

Training in competitive intelligence did not form part of the formal education of the majority of current enterprise leaders in South Africa. If one recognises that competitive intelligence plays an important role in the capability of industries and countries to become or remain competitive, the lack of training in competitive intelligence may be one of the factors contributing to the poor performance attributed to South Africa by instruments measuring the status of competitiveness of countries. Not only do South African business leaders not have understanding and knowledge for the value of competitive intelligence, but also even where the function does exist in organisations, full understanding for the role and function of such a capability lack and the function is consequently in its infancy in many South African organisations. In the majority of South African institutions, a competitive intelligence function has simply not been implemented in the company at all.

Although the need for competitive intelligence in organisations are growing and decision makers are starting to recognise the role and importance of competitive intelligence, very few publications indicate *how* this function should be installed and positioned in the company in order to benefit decision-making and ultimately support the innovation process. This paper will try to shed some light by suggesting an implementation model for competitive intelligence in a knowledge-based organisation. Although organisations use different approaches for the implementation of competitive intelligence, the model shown in this paper has proven to be successful in the implementation of competitive

intelligence in knowledge-based organisations. The model is based practical experience in organisations and not only theory.

The concept of the “knowledge-based organisation”

In order for us to be able to fully comprehend the process of developing competitive intelligence in a knowledge-based organisation it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what the concept of the “knowledge-based organisation” constitute.

Apart from the fact that knowledge is regarded as the primary resource in a knowledge-based organisation Sveiby (1999) describes the characteristics of the knowledge-based organisation in the following manner:

- In knowledge-based organisations knowledge flows are more important than financial flows: People are revenue creators, not cost items. Their true output is a better performance among their customers;
- Customer relations are no longer one-way market driven, but partnerships in which solutions are co-created and knowledge flows both ways;
- The power balance has shifted because knowledge workers know more about the technical field than their bosses, have a better feel for the market and are closer to the customers. They are environments where the staff values the approbation of their professional peers more than the approval of their leaders;
- The primary production factor - creativity of the staff - flourishes best in chaos.
- Levels in the organisation’s hierarchy are irrelevant;
- The control of the information flow is regarded as the primary power tool in the organisation and this are usurped by the Internet and collegial networks;
- Management information system does not report knowledge flows and the financial results are hopelessly out-of-date by the time they reach you;
- Managers’ power base is their relative level of knowledge. Their role shifts from supervising subordinates to supporting colleagues. Their management information system reports competence utilisation, value added, knowledge flows, customer image and staff attitudes. This information is available for everyone on the central network. Managers no longer manage people or even knowledge, but the space in which knowledge is created. This space is both the intangible culture and the tangible environment, such as the office;

- The organisational culture encourages knowledge sharing so people are recognised publicly and rewarded for sharing;
- Top management recognises trust as the bandwidth of sharing and have made investments in trust building one of their top priorities. Hoarding of knowledge and information as a means of career advancement is actively discouraged and the best knowledge workers are paid more than their bosses;
- The open culture typical of knowledge-based organisations is further encouraged by the layout of the office. The top managers no longer hide on the top floor, but have their desks on the same floors as the knowledge workers, because they recognise the value of the informal information networks. The corner rooms are used intensively for knowledge creation; they are no longer empty symbols of power occupied by bosses who are seldom there. The coffee machine is recognised as a generator of creative encounters, so it is in the center and not tucked away in a corner.

Now that we have some clarity on the way knowledge-based organisations manifest themselves we can establish the need for competitive intelligence within these organisations.

The need for competitive intelligence in organisations

According to Porter (1998) in order for organisations to remain or become truly globally competitive, it is recognised that information is required to support decisions in various levels of the organisation. In a world of information overload, the emphasis is not on more information but on actionable intelligence, capable of guiding decisions in organisations. Competitive intelligence should be positioned in the organisation to identify threats in the external environment capable of impacting negatively on the future of the company or organisation. A second and equally important function of competitive intelligence is to identify new opportunities for the organisation, leading to innovation and ultimately benefiting the competitive status of the organisation.

According to Kahaner (1996) intelligence may be required to attain a competitive advantage in a particular area of the organisation and could provide the organisation with a competitive edge by creating an advantage in one particular area of the organisation. As much as intelligence is required to make an executive decision on the future of the

company in terms of, for example, a joint venture partnership, intelligence may be required on an operational level to support a decision in terms of, for example, the price to purchase raw material or technological information for research and development purposes or marketing or competitor intelligence.

The nature of business and by definition competitive intelligence under the strategic intent doctrine of competing and out-innovating the competitors should be offensive, not defensive. However, the opposite is unfortunately true. According to Gilad (1996) most organisations and organisations are in a reactive mode, focused on identifying events after they take place rather than having a system of 'early warning' in place. Today, it is not enough to track the competitors, which is in essence a passive or defensive approach. The tracking of competitors are conducted to be able to create a model for 'competitive response modelling', implying much more than simple understanding – the implication is to anticipate actions, understanding intentions rather than tracking events. Most South African organisations support the notion of 'competitive imitation', defined as watching competitors' moves, and attempting to do a 'little better'. This strategy has proven to be very successful in the past. According to Schnaars (1994), the 'fast follower' strategy implies the need to fully understand the market leader and to build on his learning and mistakes. Evidence points to the fact that successful organisations build 'layers' of competitive advantage rather than one transient advantage. These layers suggest constant search for new competitive advantages faster than the competition can copy the existing ones, and reducing risks by having a portfolio of advantages. Whatever the core strategy of the company - winning through competitive innovation or competitive imitation, both place enormous demands on an intelligence function. This decision has a direct impact on the intelligence process applied to support decisions in the company. In the case of competitive innovation, it radically alters the nature, scope and organisational relationships of competitive intelligence in the company.

Business is driven by profit and in order to remain competitive, organisations need not only to protect their interests, but also to expand their interests. They need to out-innovate their competitors. According to Hamel and Prahalad (1994) competitive innovation is the "art of containing competitive risks within manageable proportions". To achieve this, it implies a fundamentally different approach in terms of expanding the

interests of the institution. A new intelligence process for business is required, keeping in mind the fundamental differences and understanding the needs of business to be pre-active and to search for new opportunities. Hamel and Prahalad (1994) continue by depicting traditional competitor analysis in the West as outmoded, because it concentrates on existing resources. “Assessing the current tactical advantages of known competitors will not help you understand the resolution, stamina, and inventiveness of potential competitors.”

According to Fuld (1995) competitive intelligence is applied in company or corporate environments, focussing on issues that may impact on the competitive environment of the institution, aimed at creating an early warning intelligence capability and supporting decision-making.

According to Gilad and Herring (1996) the five main uses of competitive intelligence should be put:

- To build a portfolio of competitive advantages against competitors’ sustainable” advantage;
- To create a competitive surprise against incumbents;
- To change the rules of an industry in order to unseat a leader;
- To leverage resources through the use of partners; and
- To defend against competitors attempting to achieve surprise, the creation of new advantages, the changing of the rules of engagement and the luring of partners.

Competitive intelligence supports the strategic process in organisations, acting as ‘sensor’ to indicate to top management whether the organisation is still competitive. South African organisations and corporations have to adapt to their international rivals in order to compete with them. For decades South African organisations have been isolated and protected from global market forces. Competitors are competing globally for opportunities and resources and do not remain stuck in their traditional environments – they enter South Africa to compete locally with South African organisations who are completely unfamiliar with this new type of competition staring them in the eyes. South Africa is generally perceived not to be competitive and in order for South Africa to

become competitive, new tools for decision-making is required. Competitive intelligence should play an important role to enhance the competitiveness of institutions.

Model for the implementation of competitive intelligence in the knowledge-based organisation

The model suggested is based on the Wave model to implement competitive intelligence (Havenga, 2000). The entire process should be guided by the company strategy. The company vision, mission and strategic objectives should act as constant guide for the Competitive Intelligence process.

The above-mentioned model has been designed to address five areas considered to be fundamental for the success of competitive intelligence in any organisation. These are:

- Top management support and unfiltered access,
- A competitive intelligence champion driving the process,
- Cultural support,
- Clear priorities or key intelligence needs (KINs) and
- Competitive Intelligence products or outputs

The model is based on simultaneous development of the two main waves; firstly, capacity and infrastructure development and secondly, adding operational value. Although the process theoretically starts with the development of capacity and infrastructure, the process of adding operational value is initiated very soon after management has bought into the concept of competitive intelligence. The following points are considered to be important for successful implementation of competitive intelligence in a knowledge-based organisation:

Wave 1: capacity and infrastructure development

First and foremost, management needs to support the competitive intelligence process and have a clear, shared vision for the function. Without visible support by management, the function will never be viewed as a priority among the plethora of existing initiatives in larger organisations. Management in the organisation needs to realise that the business landscape requires new tools for decision-making and that they need the support of competitive intelligence for this process. The pressure for change should exist in the institution to give the necessary priority for the implementation of this function.

Management should appoint a suitable person to guide and drive the competitive intelligence process. This person should understand the business and have good relations with other employees. However, the skills, characteristics and background of the competitive intelligence champion are less important than his/her access and relationship with senior management and in particular the Chief Executive. Management support and trust are key elements for consideration of a candidate.

Organisational readiness and timing is an important element to consider when implementing competitive intelligence in organisations. Most organisations are flooded with initiatives seen as 'key' and critical to their core operations of the institution. The timing of adding yet 'another' project to the existing overload, is an important consideration. The implementation plan should be designed to suit the organisational culture and decision-making and integrate with other initiatives in the company. Various other structures and initiatives can and should play a role in support of this initiative.

The positioning of competitive intelligence in the organisation is an issue sometimes causing political and turf battles. It is less important where the function is positioned than the requirement to be able to fulfil the entire scope of functions. Competitive intelligence should be positioned in order to be on the lookout for significant changes that may impact on the competitive future of the organisation. Experience has shown that the function should be positioned as high up in the organisation as possible and should have direct, unfiltered, access to the Chief Executive. The strategy function in the organisation is normally a good host for the function.

Wave 2: adding operational value

The reason for starting the second wave of adding operational value very soon after the function is conceived, is to deliver products and prove that the function can add value in the shortest possible time. Quick wins will 'sell' the process to management and show disbelievers that the process has value.

The accuracy with which the key intelligence needs are identified and analysed, will determine the eventual success of the process. This is equal to laying the foundation of the competitive intelligence process. The key intelligence needs should focus on issues

considered critical to the success of the company. The key intelligence needs will naturally change with the perpetual strategy of the company and needs to be updated regularly in order to remain actual and critical.

The competitive intelligence cycle is used by most organisations to guide the process of competitive intelligence. The core elements of this cycle is planning, collection, analysis and dissemination of the intelligence. The sources that will supply the competitive intelligence function with information are the internal and external networks. The competitive intelligence champion will be dependant upon cultural awareness and organisational support for the function. This support cannot only be enforced and written into performance contracts. It normally requires a culture change in institutions. This only takes place with continuous sensitising and training programs. Employees will only buy into the process when they understand the concepts and only then will they be willing to share their knowledge, contacts and skills. Competitive intelligence will need them to act as the 'sensors' of the organisation. When the function reaches maturity, these 'sensors' will start feeding the function with new information and eventually have a direct impact on the strategy of the organisation. A structured process should be put in place to develop networks, based on the identified key intelligence needs.

Analysis is the pinnacle of the competitive intelligence process. This is where value is added to information and the 'so what?' question is asked. Information is analysed and turning it into intelligence. Creating an analysis capability where products are delivered according to the decision making needs of the client, will determine the success of the capability. Suitable products should be identified and developed. These products need to be disseminated to the clients in actionable format. Intelligence should lead to decisions and actions. The intention of the function should be to add value in the shortest possible time. This value is mainly added through products.

Although the products will develop and may not be always be of exclusive value at the outset, the process is intended to continuously develop and improve. Organisational learning will take place and quality and usefulness of products will grow. Intelligence that initially made decision makers grasp for air will soon simply become the required norm and standard, always adding pressure on the function to grow and deliver better products.

Measuring the success of competitive intelligence should in the final instance be related to the support provided for management decisions. Complex mechanisms could be put in place to measure the value of the function. Specific areas of the function should be measures and constantly improved. However, organisations often fall into the trap to measure the value by verifying elements of the capacitating phase. They have a checklist to confirm execution of steps in the project plan and seem satisfied once these steps have been addressed. The most important question to evaluate the function, is simply to ask the Chief Executive what value the function has added to his decision-making. There should exist no doubt in his mind that he receives support from the function and that it adds value. He should express a growing need for intelligence. Anything less is simply not good enough.

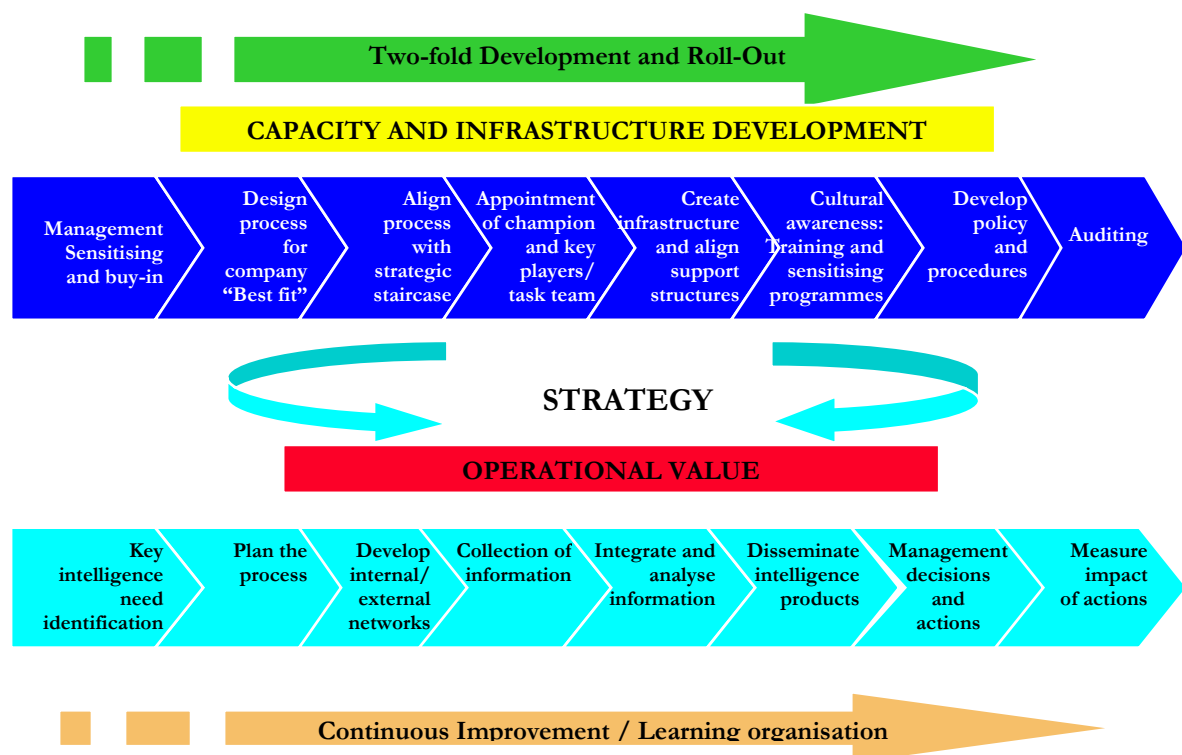


Diagram 1: Waves to implement competitive intelligence (Havenga, 2000)

The relationship between the information professional and competitive intelligence

The question however remains as to what constitute the involvement of the information professional in developing competitive intelligence in the knowledge-based organisation.

An information professional can be defined as the individual who is primarily responsible for harnessing the organisation's information resources and information capabilities to enable it to learn and adapt to its changing environment (Lindsey-King, 1998). Marshall, Fisher, Moulton and Picolla (1996) explain that information professionals provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organisation by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs.

The processes with which the information professional concern him/herself include the identification of information needs, information acquisition, its organisation and storage, the development of information products and services, and the distribution and use of information (Lindsey-King, 1998).

However, in order to accurately assess the exact extent and nature of the information professionals involvement and responsibility towards the delivery of competitive intelligence it is necessary to consider the existing skills of the information professional in comparison to the skills needed by the competitive intelligence professional.

Skills of the information professional

Elken (1998) categorizes the existing skills of the information professional in the following manner:

- Information handling skills: cataloguing, indexing, general management and organisation of knowledge;
- Training and facilitating skills: helping people of any age, background, specialism or need, to use libraries and information resources in any media; user support; user instruction;
- Evaluation skills: selection, critical evaluation and review; quality assurance of information; fitness for purpose, as needed in both traditional and digital library environments; and
- Concern for the customer.

A more comprehensive explanation of the skills of the information professional, which focuses on both, the professional as well as the personal skills of the information professional are offered by Marshall et al. (1996). According to these authors professional skills relate to the information professionals knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management and research, and the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing information services. Personal skills enable information professionals to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributors; and survive in the new world of work.

Professional skills imply that the information professional:

- Has expert knowledge of the content of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate and filter them;
- Has specialized subject knowledge appropriate to the business of the organisation or client;
- Develops and manages convenient, accessible and cost-effective information services that are aligned with the strategic directions of the organisation;
- Provides excellent instruction and support for information service users;
- Assesses information needs and designs and markets value-added information services and products to meet identified needs;
- Uses appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information;
- Uses appropriate business and management approaches to communicate the importance of information services;
- Develops specialized information products for use inside or outside the organisation or by individual clients;

- Evaluates the outcomes of information use and conducts research related to the solution of information management problems;
- Continually improves information services in response to changing needs;
- Is an effective member of the senior management team and a consultant to the organisation on information issues;

Personal skills imply that the information professional:

- Is committed to service excellence;
- Seeks out challenges and sees new opportunities both inside and outside the information center;
- Sees the information center and its services as part of the bigger process of making informed decisions.
- Seeks partnerships and alliances;
- Creates an environment of mutual respect and trust;
- Has effective communication skills;
- Works well with others in a team;
- Provides leadership;
- Plans, prioritises and focuses on what is critical;
- Is committed to lifelong learning and personal career planning;
- Has personal business skills and creates new opportunities;

- Recognizes the value of professional networking and solidarity;
- Is flexible and positive in a time of continuing change (Marshall et al., 1996).

In conclusion to the above discussion on the skills of the information professional Davenport (1997:115) reports on the results of an informal survey in which he asked students in executive education and MBA classes to list the characteristics of the ideal information professional. He explained that what surprised him was how consistent these characteristics were across groups of both MBA students and executives. Almost all of them said that the ideal information professional should have:

- A broad business understanding and knowledge of the organisation's structure and function;
- Knowledge about the diverse sources and uses of information in the organisation;
- Facility with information technology;
- Political savvy as well as the ability to exercise leadership;
- Strong interpersonal skills;
- A strong orientation toward overall business performance, rather than a narrow allegiance to internal functional goals.

Davenport (1997:115) concludes by asking the following question: "given such consistent answers, why do so few information staff, in practice, display little more than technical expertise?"

Roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional

As previously stated it is necessary to consider the roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional before the involvement of the information

professional in the competitive intelligence process can be determined. This would provide clarity on issues such as:

- Whether the information professional form part of the competitive intelligence process in the organisation;
- Whether the information professional should be included in a team of employees who would be responsible for the competitive intelligence process in the enterprise;
- What type of involvement would be required of the information professional;
- What similarities exist between the skills required of the information professional and the competitive intelligence professional.

In an effort to determine the exact nature of the roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional an analysis was done of local as well as international vacancies for competitive intelligence professionals. According to the analysed vacancies the roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional can therefore be summarized in the following manner:

Local requirements

- A good understanding of the strategy of the organisation;
- Clear understanding of the organisations objectives, and its interaction with other role-players focusing on economic growth;
- Understanding the role of technology, global trading and logistics systems, intellectual property dynamics, standards, environmental dynamics, process technology and skills issues in the development of sustainable global competitiveness;
- Ability to predict discontinuous areas of growth as well as potential growth areas in terms of technology development, changes in global trading, logistics and marketing environment, and environmental direction demand;
- A strong sense of what the current policy landscape is and also links into technology changes taking place in the world;

- Provide leadership in policy and strategy formulation on enhancing the medium- to longer term strategic competitiveness of the industry; and many more (Enterprise and Industry Development Division, 2003:12).

International requirements

- Oversee and be responsible for the competitive intelligence function of the organisation. Working with the senior management, product development, and marketing teams, set objectives for intelligence gathering, and create a feasible schedule for the collection and analysis of data;
- Lead the competitive intelligence group. Supervise the collection and analysis activities of the group's analysts, assigning projects and authorizing specific-data gathering exercises. Ensure that the organisation's intelligence and information-gathering activities are undertaken using ethical and legal techniques;
- Assess the resource requirements of the competitive intelligence group. Ensure it has the resources necessary to gather and analyse data. Procure equipment, hire and train staff, and retrain consultants as required, within the group's budget;
- Analyse data collected and draft reports;
- Assist the competitive intelligence manager in preparing presentations and reports for senior management and other units of the company. Take primary responsibility for some presentations;
- Supervise the CI group staff. Ensure that the staff acquire and maintain appropriate skills and are able to develop professionally;
- Manage the competitive intelligence group budget;
- Take responsibilities for the competitive intelligence group's outgoing analysis and conclusions. Make regular presentations of findings to senior management and other client groups (Society for Competitive Intelligence Professionals, 2000?)

It is clear that when the skills of the information professional and the roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional are compared there seems to be very little if indeed any correlation between them. This is further supported by an article in which 15 disciplines or core occupations were identified which relates favourably to the task and responsibilities involved in the analysis of collected data and thus to the process of turning information into intelligence. The fifteen identified core

occupations include behavioral scientists, cartographers, economists, engineers, graphic designers, medical analysts, multimedia and video producers and directors as well as collection analysts. However, even the role and responsibility of the collection analyst differ significantly from that of the information professional and are described in the following manner: “The analyst's role is to apply knowledge, experience, research skills, and initiative to develop meaningful and usable intelligence assessments from many sources of information. Often this is like putting together the pieces of a puzzle, received at different times from different places, to form a picture that is complete enough to comprehend—even when some pieces are still missing” (Directorate of Intelligence, 2000?). The results of a study sponsored by the Society for Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP) indicated that the following characteristics are typical of both the intelligence analyst and the information professional:

- Curiosity as information professionals find, locate and answer specific questions;
- Persistence and tenacity as information professionals use a broad spectrum of resources to identify issues impacting a client’s decision;
- Disciplined organizational skills;
- Communication skills such as writing and listening; and
- Interviewing skills as utilized in reference interviews (Competitive intelligence, 2001).

However, the study also reported on the skills, which the information professional would have to acquire in order to be able to deliver an effective and efficient analysis function within the competitive intelligence process. This clearly shows the discrepancies between what the information professional are currently capable of and what the information professional should be capable of when responsible or involved with the competitive intelligence process. The above-mentioned skills are:

- Develop intelligence mentor and corporate culture mentor;
- Participate in an intelligence team effort;
- Develop human contacts to identify management issues;
- Learn about your business;
- Practice, practice, practice;
- Solicit associates’ evaluations and recommendations;

- Take risks. Take positions. Take a stand;
- Define a limited set of intelligence associate users, learn who to serve and how to say no;
- Work on both strategic and tactical intelligence;
- Strengthen writing, presentation and debate skills;
- Gain finance and business skills such as an MBA;
- Just do it;
- Have an intelligence-friendly organization;
- Work in an environment that encourages change and new skill development (Competitive intelligence, 2001).

Although it seems as if the skills of the information professional and the roles and responsibilities of the competitive intelligence professional are far removed from one another and if the information professional have hardly anything to contribute to the competitive intelligence process there are a single activity for which the information professional are particularly skilled and without which the competitive intelligence process would be incomplete. This activity is described in one of the analysed vacancies in the following manner: “Communicate with other departments to ensure an effective flow of information to and from the competitive intelligence group. While the competitive intelligence group is primarily responsible for analysing competitive information, data should come from the entire company” (Society for Competitive Intelligence Professionals, 2000?).

Involvement of the information professional in the competitive intelligence process

Information professional, more than any other professional group within the organisation, consists over the unique ability to acquire, organise and disseminate data and/or information and would therefore be able to bring about the provision of and effective flow of data and/or information to the competitive intelligence team. The information professional, like many other professionals groups within the enterprise should recognize and contribute their unique skills and abilities to the competitive intelligence process. However, after careful consideration of the skills of the information professional this should rather be done under the guidance and management of an

individual with the necessary skills and competencies as well as a holistic view of the competitive intelligence process within the organisation.

Gilad (Cottrill, 1998:28) explains how organisations should in fact go about in choosing an individual to be responsible for competitive intelligence when he says that: “In his experience, there is at least one person with the “CI perspective” in every company. This person may be working in another job function, but has the mental outlook and business acumen required to run a CI resource”.

The challenge for information professionals are therefore to look critically at our skills and abilities and to accept that if we do not have the mental outlook, business acumen and access and relationship with senior management that is necessary to run a competitive intelligence resource we can still contribute to the competitive intelligence process by using our skill and ability to acquire, organise and disseminate data and/or information whether it is from a traditional and/or a digital environment.

Conclusion

Competitive intelligence can only contribute to a company if it receives the attention and priority it deserves. This activity should not form part of the “nice to have or know” activities in the organisation, but should be focused on the issues critical to the survival of the company –“must have or need to know” issues.

In many instances top management still lack the experience of how to “make” competitive intelligence work for them. Many executives still rely on historical knowledge and preconceived ideas to base their decisions upon. They have to be lead and ‘educated’ to trust the products and recommendations of competitive intelligence. Competitive intelligence will only gain trust of management by marketing its products and showing decision makers that they attain actionable results based on the competitive intelligence recommendations.

In order to function in the age of head to head competition, we have to develop our company ‘sensors’ to operate like our biological nervous system, capable of triggering our company reflexes for reaction to danger or need. This should provide a well-integrated flow of information to the right part of the organization at the right time. This “nervous system” should consist of the processes that can empower a company to

perceive and react to its competitive environment, sense competitor challenges and changing customer needs and to organize and react timely to address these challenges.

Organisations who have succeeded to implement an effective formal and structured competitive intelligence process focusing on critical issues, will have a competitive advantage over their rivals. Organisations can simply no longer afford not to have an effective competitive intelligence capability.

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List of diagrams

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