

# Chapter VII

## Understanding Key Intelligence Needs (KINs)

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explains how to translate an organization's strategic aims into key intelligence needs (KINs) and how to prioritize and categorize the needs. It argues that an essential aspect for any competitive intelligence (CI) professional is to gain the confidence of management to determine what information about the environment should be collected in order to produce intelligence. Furthermore the author hopes that understanding how to determine a set of KINs as derived from an organization's vision, mission, and strategic objectives and how to break down KINs into general and specific KINs will assist CI professionals to understand what their internal customers want to know about, need to know about and should know about and why, when they need to know it, and who needs to know it by identifying KINs. The application of KINs in a practical situation is illustrated in a case study of a South African company in the furniture industry.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the knowledge economy, the survival of organizations depends on their ability to see the bigger picture within their competitive environment, to track and scan that environment continuously in search of emerging threats and opportunities and to react to such threats and opportunities swiftly. To ensure focused information gather-

ing, organizations must be able to identify the variables within their competitive environment accurately. These are often their key intelligence needs (KINs).

The most fundamental concept in the field of competitive intelligence (CI) is the intelligence cycle (planning, gathering, analysis, dissemination). The cycle contains all of the elements required to produce actionable intelligence. In

the planning stage, the strategic information requirements are stated and it is the task of the CI professional to determine what information on the environment should be collected in order to produce intelligence. This step then drives the subsequent activities of gathering, analysis and dissemination. The CI cycle is initiated through a request from management. Requests come in many forms. An essential aspect for any CI professional is to gain the confidence of management so that they will continuously bring requests. The sum total of these requests represents management's KINs, or in other words, key areas of intelligence (Prescott, 1999).

The objectives of this chapter are to explain how to translate an organization's strategic aims into KINs and how to prioritize and categorize the needs. Attention will be paid to the following aspects:

- An explanation of the concepts KINs and taskings
- How to determine a set of KINs as derived from an organization's vision, mission, and strategic objectives
- How to break down KINs into general and specific KINs and how to develop taskings
- KINs as the direction giver of an organization's CI analysis effort
- The importance of regularly interviewing managers to update the set of KINs

Finally the application of KINs in a practical situation will be illustrated through a case study of Just Wood, a South African company in the furniture industry.

## KINS AND TASKINGS

Managers have a need to know about key events, changes, trends, and news in and affecting their environment. They need to understand the im-

plications to make decisions and act accordingly. Managers benefit only from information that they regard as useful and meaningful. It makes no sense to spend resources to acquire intelligence if it is not to be used in decision-making. One of the problems of identifying information needs is that it is very hard for managers to articulate their information needs. A frequent reason for this is that managers do not know what information is available or they do not understand how it is obtained or used. The information needs of managers may also be subconscious. These subconscious needs cannot be assessed even with the best methods because they usually surface only in a decision-making situation. To overcome these problems, CI professionals in an organization need to understand what their internal customers want to know about, need to know about and should know about and why, when they need to know it, and who needs to know it. CI professionals have a formal process they use to answer these questions—identifying KINs. The initial responsibility of any CI professional is to conduct a stakeholder analysis to determine whom the key intelligence users are, what they will use intelligence for, when it is required, why it is needed, and how the intelligence will be used.

According to Marrs (2005) every function within an organization has KINs, even if that function does not specifically codify it. He explains that there is a primal, overarching need to see, analyze, understand, decide, and act on what is happening in the present and anticipate what might happen in the future.

According to Sewlal (2003) KINs are business issues that are of critical importance to an organization. Management is responsible for defining the KINs, based on decisions they need to make and these KINs provide the necessary direction to the CI effort, ensuring that the operation focuses on collecting and analyzing only key data relevant to the KINs.

Robinson (2005) explains that determining KINs is the most critical and difficult step in the

intelligence process, as it identifies users' needs, provides focus and purpose to the intelligence effort, engages users in the intelligence process and develops a sustained process. KINs can also be seen as a "pre-eminent list of priorities" (Johnson, 2006) and are crucial because they provide focus for the organization's overall competitive intelligence programme, gives insight to resources required (for example, sources of information), provides a basis for categorizing intelligence requirements so that planning and organizing the CI programme can take place, reduces KINs duplication, and determines which needs overlap or complement each other (Evans, 2005).

The KINs process enables a CI professional to separate the "must know" type of information from the "nice to have to satisfy curiosity" type of information. The KINs process involves interviewing CI users to identify (and then answer) the key questions they have on competitors and the competitive environment so as to reduce the risk involved in making decisions. A KIN is the information or intelligence that decision makers need to enable them to make a business decision.

CI is not about collecting all information, but about focusing on the issues of highest importance to senior management. It also provides a wider focus than only on competitors to include facets such as suppliers, customers, and the regulatory environment. These focus areas are KINs of an organization. KINs are those decision-based, strategic issues about which managers must be regularly informed to set and implement strategy. They act as the filter through which information collection and analysis activities pass. They also provide the necessary direction to the CI effort, ensuring that the operation focuses on collecting and analyzing only key data relevant to the KINs. This ensures that the intelligence process is demand-driven with direct and constant impact on strategy and decision-making. The critical success factor in any intelligence operation is meeting the user's real needs—and doing it in such a way that the company decision makers can

act on the resulting intelligence and succeed in whatever business endeavour is involved (Viviers, Saayman & Muller, 2005).

The origin of a KIN can be threefold (Muller, 2002a):

- An event or development in the competitive environment could give rise to a KIN, for example an unexpected takeover involving two competitors that changes the competitive scene.
- The routine scanning activity of an effective analysis capability regularly uncovers information that has the potential to have a positive or negative impact on strategy, for example when an organization with a dominant position in a given market tracks a growth in competitor market share, they would develop strategies to protect their core market share position from rivals.
- Employees who have a competitive mindset might pick up a rumour or bits and pieces of information that would require further investigation.

KINs should be translated into simple coherent questions that can be used to task others to collect the required information.

The following are a few examples of KINs (Evans, 2005):

- What impact will technology have on our high volume product line?
- How is our competitor able to retain major government contracts year after year when tenders for these contracts are invited?
- What is the timeline for when our competitors will launch their new services?
- Should we expand our Johannesburg facility or build a new facility in Cape Town?
- Who are the key customers of our competitor?
- What impact does this new regulation have on our business?



- How well does this supplier perform with other companies?

Key intelligence questions (KIQ) are discrete questions that address the KINs and define the research and analysis activities. Also referred to as key intelligence indicators or taskings, these are the pieces of information that need to be gathered to address the KINs (Calof, 2004). For example, if the specific requirement is whether market research is effective, indicators would include consumer surveys, focus groups and test marketing (Muller, 2002a). If the KIN is that the CEO wants to confirm whether Competitor B has production expansion plans and how this would impact on the market share, taskings will be (Muller, 2002b):

- Visit the local council to enquire about any new rezoning applications.
- Has there been an environmental impact study? If yes, obtain a copy.
- Scan the media for possible recruitment drive for new personnel at plant.

Taskings are thus the translation of the information need into simple, clear and concise questions that would yield answers. Taskings are compiled by the CI professional and focus on those areas where an information gap has been identified or when information needs have to be assessed, compared, or evaluated (Muller, 2002a).

## **HOW TO DETERMINE A SET OF KINs AS DERIVED FROM AN ORGANIZATION'S VISION, MISSION, AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

CI analysis should take its cue for analysis and interpretation from the organization strategy and the KIN that result from changes and action in the competitive business environment (Muller, 2002a). Senior managers and those assigned lead-

ership responsibilities are entrusted with running the organization and making the critical business decisions for the organization. It is only common sense that the CI needs of such decision makers and planners are important to the company's business success and competitive survival (Herring, 2003). Both senior management and functional managers will be working on similar goals and priorities—and consequently, effective CI operations focused on senior management's KINs will produce intelligence that should benefit both. CI typically enables senior and functional managers to make informed decisions about marketing, research and development, and investing tactics to long-term business strategies. CI provides insight into who is winning market share and why; the competitive strategies of competitors; developing the right products for the changing market and customer preferences, market and brand image, and a competitive culture that can enhance innovation and ultimately competitiveness (Viviers, Muller, & Du Toit, 2005). Senior managers need specific strategically focused intelligence concerning future conditions in the marketplace and industry. CI allows senior managers to better understand the industry and competitors in order to make decisions and to develop a strategy that provides a competitive advantage that achieves continuing performance results superior to competitors. At the same time, functional managers need tactical information on business development and customer problem solving. Tactical intelligence is generally operational and on a smaller scale, not so centered on being predictive. Tactical information includes competitors' terms of sale, their price policies, and the plans they have for changing the way in which they differentiate one or more of their products from competitors. Functional managers such as marketing and sales managers are the main users of tactical intelligence.

Often, KINs are broad and requests are not well articulated, thus making the second phase of the cycle (gathering) particularly important. Before

the intelligence process can effectively begin, agreement must be reached on the parameters of the specific intelligence request in terms of exactly what is sought, the required time frame, and any constraints such as budget and confidentiality (Prescott, 1999).

Many organizations choose to focus on competitor moves, industry conditions, customer needs or pricing as KINs. Other KINs may stem from the organization's mission statement or long-term objectives.

CI professionals should continuously determine the KINs of managers. This is very important for a number of reasons, because KINs (Evans, 2005):

- Provide focus for the overall CI programme within the organization.
- Give insight into what resources are needed—critical skills and external sources of information.
- Allow categorization of intelligence requirements to enable planning and organization of the CI program.
- Reduce duplicative efforts since KINs may overlap and complement one another.

A number of companies have focussed on the identification of KINs (for example, Motorola and Merck) (Herring, 1999). Motorola earmarked money to improve the flow of critical CI in the organization. When the intelligence team found that Japanese manufacturers were shifting their budgets from manufacturing to research and development, Motorola acted by shifting a portion of its own research and development effort to Japan in order to participate in the new environment. At Merck the internal CI Group identifies and prioritizes KINs. This allowed management to allocate resources to win or hold market share in the future environment and maximized return on investments. This ensured that intelligence operations were effective and appropriate intelligence was produced. Senior managers within

organizations are demanding informed/accurate intelligence, and are requesting that it be made available at the earliest opportunity. An early warning system will allow potential threats to be identified and key players to be monitored (Herring, 1999).

The accuracy with which KINs are identified will determine the eventual success of the CI process. KINs should therefore focus on issues considered critical to the success of the organization.

## **HOW TO BREAK DOWN KINs INTO GENERAL AND SPECIFIC KINs AND HOW TO DEVELOP TASKINGS**

A distinction can be made between a general KIN ("We need to know something about the logistic capacity of competitors X and Y") and a specific KIN ("We need to know the number of trucks and their capacity") (Vriens, 2004).

According to Calof (2004), KINs fall into three categories:

- Strategic KINs (for example monitor market growth)
- Early warning KINs (monitor the technology environment and predict what the major change in technology will be)
- Profile KINs (develop a profile on customers or competitors to predict their moves)

Answering a KIN helps a decision maker to make a decision. For example, in the case of a company determining that the market is a good one for it (strategic KIN), this should result in a decision for it to enter the market. A strategic KIN may also be, "What is the detailed global position of your organization and that of your competitors?"

For an organization, predicting that there will be a change in local buying should allow it to decide what changes to make to its own poli-



cies (early warning KIN). Another example of an early warning KIN may be, "What are you most afraid your competitors might do in the next two years to change the landscape?"

It is the job of CI professionals to identify the organization's KINs, for example tracking competitor market share might indicate a growth in market share and therefore a raised threat to own market share (profile KIN) (Calof, 2004). Another example of a profile KIN is: "*What actions have your competitors taken in the past two years that have changed the competitive landscape?*"

Having identified the key topics needed is only the first step in the CI cycle. Once the KINs have been defined, existing knowledge must be reviewed to determine where there are gaps in the organization's knowledge. A collection plan identifies what types of information need to be gathered and from what sources. Information collection has to be managed to ensure that all potential sources of information are used effectively, internal and external sources are integrated, and collection is cost-effective (Finegold, Carlucci & Page, 2005).

Often, KINs are broad and requests are not well articulated. Before the intelligence process can effectively begin, agreement must be reached on the parameters of the specific intelligence request in terms of exactly what is sought, the required time frame and any constraints such as budget and confidentiality. For the CI professional, interviewing skills that involve extensive probing to determine the exact needs of management enhance the chance that the request will be properly interpreted (Prescott, 1999). It is important to identify and define general information requirements. These are the macro-level questions that must be answered to satisfy the client's needs.

Action plans should be created from the information gathered during the interviews. It is the action plans that drive both the collection and analysis operations that are needed to address each KIN. Those who can potentially be sources inside the organization should know KINs. To

ensure that the right information is collected (often by marketers, employees attending conferences and seminars, employees on trips abroad—in other words people who come into contact with external, usually human sources of information), the CI professional should draw up a list of taskings derived from the KIN (Muller, 2002a). This pro-active approach to CI will require regular meetings and surveys to assess the needs of the decision makers.

### **KINs AS THE DIRECTION GIVER OF AN ORGANIZATION'S CI ANALYSIS EFFORT**

Analyzing KINs is very important. Intelligence and insights are not achieved by directly answering the KIQ, but by analyzing the information gathered as a result of researching the KIQ. Because focus is important and time usually limited, the CI professional should determine certain factors such as the following (Muller, 2002a):

- Is it a valid request or should other divisions answer the request? For example, market segmentation would rather be the work of the market research department whereas an analysis and comparison of the distribution networks of competitors is a typical KIN.
- What resources would be required to answer the request? For example, project team, finances, time, and information search means. This is necessary to ensure that deadlines are met.
- How to package the intelligence: Detailed report? Brief presentation? A one-liner?
- Time available?

It is the CI professional who will determine what information is already available to answer a KIN, determine gaps in the information picture, knows where to find the missing information and asks the specific questions to obtain the missing

information (taskings). Often, by consulting secondary sources, the intelligence database and the Internet, the CI professional is able to answer a KIN. Internal sources may also include (Muller, 2002b):

- Marketers and sales persons (for information on distribution channels, pricing and rebates, promotional material, and customer comments on quality)
- The company grapevine (personnel often interact with the personnel of a competitor at for example conferences, school events, or other social gatherings)
- Financial analysts (analysing the annual results of a competitor)
- Research and development (information on latest technology trends)
- Human resources (keeping track of recruitment drives)

Creating an analysis capability where products are delivered according to the KINs of the organization will determine the success of the CI function. It is important to recognize that each KIN may require a different set of analytical models. Suitable products should be identified and developed. These products need to be disseminated to the clients in actionable format (Havenga & Botha, 2003). Turning information into intelligence requires several analytical steps. First, intelligence processing converts the information into a form that is useful for analysis. Processing might include validating data or writing summaries of key facts. Once CI professionals have matched up the KINs to the appropriate analytical model, they can start collecting information to feed the analysis. If CI staff start collecting information before knowing which analytical model to use, they tend to waste time collecting the wrong types of information for the analysis (Evans, 2005). Analysis then converts the raw data and information into intelligence that answers

the organization's questions (Finegold, Carlucci & Page, 2005). Analysis could also lead to some KINs that management has not raised.

Once the analysis has been completed, the results of the CI process or project should be packaged and communicated to those with the authority and responsibility to act on the findings. The intelligence that is presented has to provide answers to the users' questions or KINs. If intelligence is not delivered, no intelligence was created.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULARLY INTERVIEWING MANAGEMENT TO UPDATE THE SET OF KINs**

The largest driving force behind KINs should be a dialogue between the CI professional and management. If the CI staff do not know what the needs are, they will not be sensitive to what they should be looking for (Viviers & Muller, 2004). KINs will naturally change with the perpetual strategy of the organization and need to be updated regularly to remain actual and critical.

In order to fulfil the main aim of providing a constant flow of focused, timely, and accurate intelligence that answers the KINs of the decision makers, organizations practising CI should rather spend more time on planning the activity and providing focus than on collecting, analysing and interpreting the information.

As CI revolves around the analysis of CI and should therefore be inclusive and cross-functional by nature, frequent interaction amongst relevant persons should take place. Regular communication with the customers (colloquiums or general information briefing sessions) will help redirect the CI project so that the final results deliver exactly what management really needs. Regular communication to users is important, such as unexpected delays, inability to meet due dates, and other updates for the CI user (Evans, 2005). This



underlines the fact that CI is a continuous process of requesting information, planning, collection, analysis and production, and finally action.

It is important to know the CI users. Is the user of the CI analytical or is he or she a rapid decision maker with little time for analysis? If the KINs will be used to make a quick decision, then recommendations should be reported in a very clear, concise, and specific manner. On the other hand, if the KINs will be used for evaluating a major decision, then alternatives should be included in the recommendation. The key point is to meet the expectations of the decision makers. Different people make decisions in different ways and good CI recognizes this (Evans, 2005). Once intelligence has been presented, it invariably leads to new KINs or a need for elucidation. This underlines the fact that CI is a continuous process of requesting information, planning, collection, analysis and production, and finally action.

## CASE STUDY

Just Wood is a well-established maker of indigenous wood furniture and has enjoyed over 30 years of business in South Africa. Just Wood manufactures office furniture for the high-income business market. Just Wood's key competitor is Office Mobile. For the last ten years, Just Wood has undercut pricing for new furniture against Office Mobile. Just Wood is known for its fast manufacturing process of standard type designs. This has enabled Just Wood to keep its prices lower than those of Office Mobile. Just Wood has a strong marketing focus regarding the South African market and the local competitive environment. It has a countrywide dealer network and each dealer's financial statements are analyzed on a regular basis. Just Wood's customer base includes government departments, corporate companies and embassies. Previously Just Wood, like many other South African companies, was fairly protected from the forces of global business, but

now it is suddenly part of a bigger, largely unprotected environment. A Danish company, Keplers, is well known for very innovative and functional office furniture. In January 2006, Keplers issued a press release, indicating that it will market its full range of products in South Africa.

Just Wood started CI operations in 1997, when market research and other market information were concentrated in one place, and on this basis an information service was formed that since 2003 has been known as a CI unit. Just Wood approaches its competitive position as part of an open system comprising input, process, output, and feedback within an environment. Its organizational structure can be described as a hybrid intelligence system. Senior management's needs are the overriding driving force in setting intelligence targets and intelligence methodologies for the collection and analysis of information are fairly consistent throughout the organization. Just Wood requires accurate predictions of the future: what products will be successful, what markets will be attractive, what capabilities will be required? The company chair manages the CI process and a team of senior managers (product development manager, marketing manager, financial manager) conduct it. The CI unit consists of two workers; one coordinating the market surveys and the other working as an analyst, who gathers and combines information and coordinates its accessibility.

CI plays a role in the company's growth strategy and real-time information gathering and analysis assist the company in making the right decisions. Just Wood constantly nurtures a culture of competitiveness and aims to ensure that all employees know their CI roles and responsibilities. CI permeates the whole company with participation and contribution from every employee. Employees are regularly sensitized to their CI role and function through monthly meetings, where they are also provided with the information needs requirements. The KINs of the company's decision makers are known:



- They need to know how to be different in the industry, since innovation to attain competitive advantage has become the differentiating factor (strategic KIN).
- They need intelligence on suppliers and their ability to supply on a continuous basis (strategic KIN).
- When a new competitor is considering entering the market, Just Wood would like to know about it long enough in advance to be able to take effective counteraction and to identify new opportunities or threats in the relevant markets (early warning KIN).
- They need to be aware of any change in the relative strengths or weaknesses of Just Wood's rivals as they occur, if not before the event (profile KIN).

These KINs are regularly communicated to those that need to contribute information. Since the KINs alter constantly, Just Wood realizes the importance of revising and communicating with them regularly. Information on South African related trends and issues, such as the impact of legislation, labor regulations, and the export and import market, are collected on a continuous basis. Customer behavior and changing preferences, and also the choice the present buyers can exercise, require research into local buyer preferences and lifestyle. Basic customer needs largely remain unchanged; wants, however, change constantly and unpredictably. The dealer network is the front section that provides invaluable information on market and customer developments. Sales are the main source of primary information. Information is gathered by briefing and debriefing sales employees on a monthly basis. These projects are conducted without anyone being specifically tasked. There are checks and balances including incentives, in place to ensure that employees gather information.

At Just Wood information is analyzed and interpreted before it can be used in decision-making. The analyst in the CI unit is responsible for ana-

lyzing information. Cross-functional analytical teams are developed for specific ad hoc projects as and when required. The responsibilities of the analyst are operational, namely to collect, collate, and analyze information given the company's KINs. Analytical tools are limited to industry analysis and blind-spot analysis. The goal of CI is not simply to gather information, but to create actionable intelligence. In this case, competition's product characteristics will not only be identified and compared with the company's, but an optimal product will be created. The optimal product will then be compared to the existing product to determine if the company really have the wherewithal to move ahead. A number of CI products are produced to meet diverse needs. Some are general and for all business partners and some are for specific groups such as sales people, business line managers, and senior management. The analyst produces products that are delivered daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annually. The goal is to leverage central information sources but package CI products to meet the varying needs of different user groups.

Information is accessible to all and only once it is interpreted to draw effective conclusions from limited data and to put together information that does not often fit together at first glance, is it translated into competitive advantage. Reports are short, focused, to the point, and include:

- Daily industry news
- Competitive updates
- Product category reviews
- Competitor financial updates

KINs are regularly communicated to employees that might be in a position to provide useful information through monthly meetings with sales employees and e-mails. Outcomes of the CI process are integrated into strategy and business planning. Just Wood has a strategic intelligence process based on strategic business issues, integrated into a business plan through a process of

constant input and a regular update of the business plan, keeping pace with constantly changing variables. Industry analysis is a cataloguing of the market competitive structure: substitute products, new entrants, existing rivals and competition, consumers/buyers, and suppliers. The analysis is used to create a roadmap for Just Wood. The roadmap is characterized by events that could occur and should be planned for in the event they come true. The roadmap is linked to Just Wood's business plan. The business plan is short, concise and to the point and only contains the intelligence necessary for proper strategic planning. Particular focus is afforded to customers and questions such as how they see the future of the furniture industry; customer preferences and what impact this would have on sales.

Just Wood employees have a generally high awareness of their CI roles and responsibilities. The CI function provides insightful analysis on the competition—where they are now, and most importantly, where they are going. It also provides insight on causes and likely future outcomes—why did things happen as they did, what is likely to happen in the future, how can the company capitalize. The CI function also assists senior management in developing and reviewing the identified KINs. Review is ongoing, alerting senior management to issues not currently on its agenda.

## CONCLUSION

The KINs process is the most difficult task in the CI cycle. It is the critical first step required for identifying user's intelligence needs, providing focus and purpose to the intelligence effort, engaging users in the intelligence process, and developing a sustained process.

KINs are the basis of CI and should have the support of the whole organization, not just decision makers, as they form the foundation for the organization's future. They overcome information

overload, determine and fill gaps and focus the CI process. A KIN is the foundation of what decision makers need to make decisions.

Effectively managing KINs in an organization results in continuous knowledge of events and trends in the competitive business environment, making it possible to inform management and employees in order to support the strategic direction through value-added decision-making. An effective intelligence report should always contain a clear, concise, and objective message that is responsive to original, actionable KINs. It is only when the CI function is addressing the KINs of an organization, and actually begins to anticipate the organization's future intelligence needs, that the company becomes an intelligent organization. KINs change constantly. What is valid today might be outdated tomorrow. CI is an evolutionary process that takes years of honing to come to fruition.

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