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Intelligence for Living

I began this course of study with a nervous excitement. I knew I was stepping into foreign territory. I've never worked in a true business environment and I'm not sure I ever will. I love working in an organization that has a noble mission, such as literacy or education. My impression of the business world is that the mission is to make money. Not a bad mission, just one I'm not sure I could pour my heart into. Yet, there are things that have always intrigued me about the corporate world. Such as the fast-paced seriousness of it, the possibility of flex hours, the fringe benefits like company parties and free products, and the opportunity to wear cool suits. And, oh yeah, the potential to earn a lot more money than most public institutions can ever offer.

So I took this class as a kind of litmus test for myself. Competitive intelligence sounded like something that had to do with the business world. I would study it this summer and if I found it neither boring nor repulsive, I reasoned I could survive working in a corporation. And if I loved it, I would be sure to pursue corporate librarianship. In the end, the test to guide my future career options was inconclusive. But I learned many surprising and interesting things about competitive intelligence today. Here are some of the most significant:

1. Information is not intelligence. Evaluation and analysis must occur for it to become intelligence.

This point was brought home in the lecture and readings for the first module, but it was also a concept that was brought up throughout the interviews in the Super Searchers text. I think we need this reminder because as information people, we

tend to fall in love with what we find. Frankly, I just love to know about stuff, which is how I ended up in this profession and what keeps me going. But for the information to have value, we need to take it apart and put it back together in a way that meaningfully addresses the problem we've been asked to solve.

2. Everyone does CI at some level in their lives.

Hilary did a wise thing when she started the course. By way of introduction, we each shared an incident in our lives when information made a big difference. Not only did we get to know each other a bit, but it got us thinking outside of the box from day one. For me it opened my mental framework to acknowledge all the ways that I gather, analyze, and act upon intelligence with my personal and professional life.

3. CI isn't always about beating out another company. It's about knowing where your company is at and where it is headed and what factors affect it.

Although it was rather long, I appreciated the fifth chapter of the Vibert text. I enjoyed learning the techniques used to solve CI problems. But I was most impressed by the variety of settings and uses for the intelligence. While it seemed most of the Super Searchers interviews discussed competitor concerns, many also discussed how CI is so much more. The CI professional looks at all the factors that can influence a company's performance.

4. Don't lose sight of why you are doing the research. Always remember the problem you are solving.

This was mentioned in a few of the interviews and always made me smile. I know how easy it is to get sucked into discovering information. This must be an even more dangerous problem in the business world where time is money. The reality is that

you will find a lot of “nice to know” pieces of data, but only the “need to know” pieces have value and will help you get the job done.

5. Continue communicating with the client as you work on a project to make sure they are getting what they need. And that they understand what the results may be.

Most of the Super Searcher interviewees mentioned client communication, but I was most impressed with the researchers who made this a priority. Getting the assignment, going off to work it out and returning with a deliverable sounds very efficient. But I think the best product, and the happiest client, is developed when the researcher communicates findings as they go. That way, the client knows how things are shaping up, removing nasty surprises. It also allows the client to contribute, even helping out with key contacts or information if things get bogged down since they know their industry best. It can also give the client more faith in the resulting analysis because they watched as the data drove the results.

6. Figure out who knows what and make connections with others, building a network for yourself.

This was a theme that came up over and over again in the readings and our discussions. It's all about people. Most of the really insightful information is in someone's head. Cultivating contacts and understanding how to share and get others to share with you seems critical to good CI.

7. Call it as you see it. Look at the data and make intuitive leaps with it, even if you think it is not what the client wants to hear.

I admired the researchers who said they had encountered unhappy clients because they reported what they thought, based on the data. If you only tell someone what they want to hear, you are actually doing them more harm than good. When the data and analysis lead you to believe in certain outcomes, it's your duty to let the client know so they can best prepare.

8. Present your information in a manner that best suits the person receiving and using it.

When I wrote this one out, it seems like simple common sense; make the information useable. But not every researcher seemed to follow this. Some had standardized their deliverables with templates, which certainly has benefits. Yet I agree with the researcher who said you should know your client's learning style and adapt the presentation to it. It seems like this tactic would make it more likely that your recommendations will be acted upon.

9. Start with your own company, your own environment, then look outwards.

"This above all, to thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man." (Hamlet) To even be able to understand the data you collect on other companies, you have to fully know your own company. Otherwise, you will not have a reference point or the necessary context for your discoveries.

10. You can do effective CI without breaking the law or your own code of ethics.

This was another issue we covered at length in the readings and in the discussions.

I myself had wondered if CI wasn't a little bit shady before I took this course. It seems that there are still people out there who persist in an "all's fair" approach to

gathering and using intelligence. But several of the researchers we read about made compelling cases for how CI can be done in a legitimate fashion. This bodes well for the future of the profession.

11. CI is not a start and stop project. It is an ongoing process of monitoring the environment.

Good, effective CI doesn't seem to be something you do occasionally or when requested. If you are consistently monitoring the environment, you will be aware of significant data as it appears. You will also be more ready to utilize the information and have a better knowledge base to draw upon for analysis. And, as one researcher pointed out, you will be able to foresee potential problems and opportunities, then act accordingly.

This quarter was a richly textured learning experience for me. Although much of what we read and discussed was about a business world that I may never enter, I found significant meaning for my own life through this work. At its root, I believe competitive intelligence is about discovering information, analyzing and synthesizing that information, drawing conclusions based on the information, and then taking action. This is the process by which information becomes intelligence. And each of us needs intelligence by which to guide our lives on the best possible path.