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The largest survey of "leading-edge" competitor intelligence managers

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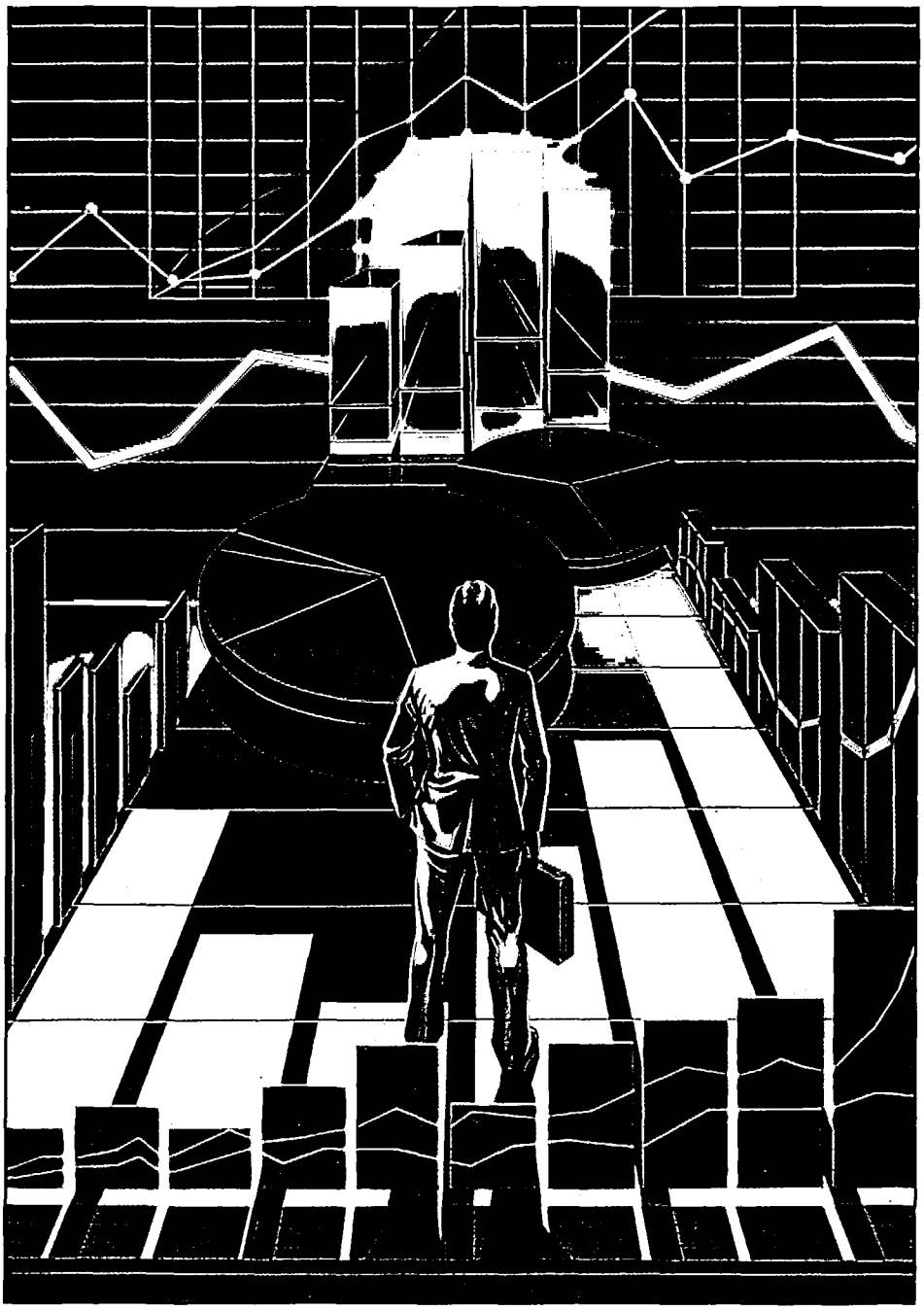
The Largest Survey of "Leading-Edge" Competitor Intelligence Managers

By John E. Prescott and Daniel C. Smith

If you need to improve the quality of your competitive analysis effort, this benchmark survey of the most "professional" practitioners of the art of intelligence will guide your program development.



How do "leading-edge" organizations structure effective competitive intelligence programs? This is one of the questions most frequently asked by managers newly assigned the responsibility for enhancing their firms' competitive intelligence efforts. The answer can be hard to come by. At many of the "role model" companies, competitive intelligence is still conducted sporadically by many different functions and transmitted to "customers" without a plan for the organization as a whole.

Suppose you're a manager in the initial stages of developing a coordinated intelligence program or you're modifying existing programs to fit the evolving needs of your organization. To justify your plans for change—and to get the resources you need to put them into action—you need a set of "benchmarks" derived from a broad selection of competitive intelligence programs.

Because competitive intelligence is still rapidly evolving, we decided that the best way to begin the process of developing this set of benchmarks was to survey the competitive intelligence practices of a certain set of leading-edge companies (see box: "The Study"). While there are many areas for which benchmarks could be developed, we focused on the four key components of any competitive intelligence effort (see Exhibit 1): The administration and structure of the program, characteristics of competitive intelligence personnel; core project tasks; and the outcomes, benefits, and problems associated with an intelligence program. We hope our data will enable practitioners to formulate new agendas for the enhancement of competitive intelligence within their organizations.

Administration and Structure of Competitive Intelligence Programs

One of the four components of a competitive intelligence (CI) program is the design of its administrative process and structure. While the functions and characteristics of a particular CI program often reflect the unique needs of the organization it serves, it is possible to identify patterns across a large number of CI programs. A typical CI program provides answers to a series of key questions:

■ **What should be the mission of a CI program?** There are three types of missions: informational, offensive, and defensive. Most firms have a mixture of all three. Informational missions are designed to provide a general understanding of an industry and its competitors. In contrast, offensive missions attempt to identify areas where competitors are vulnerable and/or to assess the impact strategic actions would have on competitors. Defensive missions attempt to identify potential moves that a competitor might make that would endanger a firm's position in the market. By and large, the firms in this sample devoted 42 percent of their CI efforts to informational missions, 28 percent to offensive, and 30 percent to defensive.

■ **Should we focus on strategic or tactical projects?** A second aspect of a CI program mission concerns the type of projects undertaken. While 51 percent of the projects were tactical, and designed to assist in implementing a business's current strategy, 49 percent were of a strategic nature, oriented toward changes in the strategy. The results suggest that CI is equally applicable to strategic and tactical problems.

■ **Should our programs be comprehensive or project based?** The sample firms were evenly split between those that organized CI programs to provide a comprehensive, ongoing flow of interrelated intelligence for a particular set of industries and competitors, and those with a project-based orientation.

The answers to these three questions suggest that the typical functions of a CI program include maintaining overall industry awareness, conducting special projects, serving as an input to strategic planning, identifying new opportunities, and assisting in the communication of intelligence to the field. The variety of objectives that CI functions assume are reflected in the following comments from the survey participants.

"CI is a centralized resource to which anyone in our company can come with questions related to the industry or competitors—we save them considerable time and effort. Plus everyone is working on the same information, so information is consistent and verifiable."

"We try to raise issues that have not been recognized by the business."

"One of our objectives is to provide senior management with an effective tool to measure our products and performance relative to the competition."

"Most of our effort is devoted to identifying industry developments, new business opportunities, and potential threats."

"Facilitating information transfer is a key object of our unit."

■ **How long have firms had established CI programs?** The average number of years was four, with

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This article is based on Professor Prescott's presentation of their study at The Planning Forum's International Conference in Atlanta in April.

Exhibit 1
The Four Components of a Competitive Intelligence Program

Administration and Structure of Program	Core Project Tasks
Characteristics of Competitive Intelligence Personnel	Outcomes, Benefits; and Problems

a range from one to twenty-five. In the firms polled, 42 percent of CI programs have been in existence two years or less; 74 percent have existed four years or less; and 18 percent have been in existence six years or longer.

■ **How many people should be assigned specifically to the CI function?** On the average, there were three full-time employees, one part-time employee, and one clerical assistant.

■ **Where is the organizational location of CI activity?** The location of the 95 programs in the sample was distributed as follows:

Corporate Planning Department	35
Divisional Planning Department	15
Business Unit Planning Department	5
Functional Departments (e.g., Marketing)	40

■ **Do most organizations centralize their intelligence activities?** A centralized competitor intelligence unit existed for 32 of the 95 firms, and 75 percent had four or fewer CI units at other locations throughout their company.

■ **What is a typical budget for a CI program?** The average budget (for the 59 programs for which a budget was established) was $550,000, with a median of $200,000, and a range from $15,000 to $6,500,000. A percentage breakdown for specific items was:

Salaries	46%
Clerical Support	9%
Materials and Equipment	14%
Training	6%
Contract Research	23%
Other	2%

There are three main characteristics that summarize CI programs. First, formal CI programs tend to be quite new—four years on average. Second, organizations tend to have decentralized CI programs located within planning or marketing departments, generally with a staff of three. Third, the budgets of CI programs run in the neighborhood of $200,000 to $500,000, with salaries, contract research, and materials and equipment comprising the bulk of the budget.

Competitive Intelligence Personnel

Trained competitive intelligence personnel are a key component of any CI program. A typical job profile for CI professionals is shown in Exhibit 2. It examines four personnel categories—time spent in CI activities; years in CI; salary, and training needs.

Interestingly, many CI personnel have substantial job responsibilities other than those involving CI. This may be due to their job location. Most are in planning or functional departments rather than in separate CI units.

A second finding is that a great many of the people now working in CI are new to the field. This explains why techniques of data analysis, MIS design and application, and the managerial aspects of CI are the three crucial areas targeted for additional training. Most CI personnel are currently satisfied with their data-collection, data-base utilization, writing, and presentation skills. Given the evolution of the field, from simple data collection to projecting its implications, more emphasis is going to be placed on both analysis and the managerial aspects of CI.

The average CI professional's salary is somewhere between $40,000 and $50,000. However, the absence of

Exhibit 2
Competitive Intelligence Job Profile*

Average time spent in job is 63%, but:
- 30% spend 100% of their time.
- 50% spend >65% of their time.
- 27% spend <33% of their time.

Average years of experience in CI is four, but:
- 42% have two years or less of experience.
- 75% have four years or less of experience.
- 13% have eight or more years of experience.

The salary breakdown is:

■ Less than $30,000	8%
■ $30,000 – $39,999	26%
■ $40,000 – $49,999	24%
■ $50,000 – $59,999	18%
■ More than $60,000	24%

Training opportunities: Areas in which individuals indicated; that additional training would be *very* helpful (score of 6 or 7 on a seven-point scale):

■ Data-collection techniques.	25%
■ Data-analysis techniques.	51%
■ Data-base utilization.	34%
■ Writing skills.	24%
■ Oral presentation skills.	31%
■ Managerial aspects of CI.	38%
■ MIS design and use.	49%

**This profile was based on responses from 95 CI professionals.*

Exhibit 3
Time Allocated to the Activities of a Competitive Intelligence Assignment

Activity	% of Time
Planning	13
Collecting Data	34
Data Analysis	30
Presentation and Dissemination	16
Evaluation	5
Other	2

a consistent salary pattern probably reflects the newness of the activity in an organization, the experience levels of those staffing CI jobs, and the percentage of time that an individual spends on these activities.

Many individuals noted that their organizations have struggled to develop job titles that fit the operating style of the organization. Some of these titles include:

- Competitive Strategy Manager.
- Associate Director, Competitive Assessment.
- Information Analyst.
- Director, Competitive Analysis.
- Director of Information Services.
- Manager of Market Intelligence.
- Assistant Manager, Competitive Analysis and Environmental Scanning.

Core Tasks of a Competitive Intelligence Program

The third component and the most fundamental responsibility of a CI program, is to undertake projects that can assist managers in their decision making.

CI assignments involve planning, collecting data, data analysis to develop intelligence, dissemination of intelligence to appropriate managers on a timely basis, and the evaluation of the assignment. The average time devoted to each of these activities is presented in Exhibit 3. The bulk of the time (64 percent) is about equally divided between collection and analysis. Similarly, planning and dissemination activities are given nearly equal amounts of time. The most revealing finding is that 22 percent of the survey participants indicated that they did not devote any time to the evaluation of their CI activities.

Sources. The collection of data begins with the identification and utilization of key sources. In this study, the importance, timeliness, verifiability, reliability, and cooperativeness of personal communications and published sources inside and outside of the organization were examined. Personal sources can be characterized by face-to-face contact with an individual or group of individuals within or outside the organization. Written sources are documents, video tapes, and information from computer data bases generated by individuals inside or outside the organization.

Some of the issues associated with data sources include the timeliness of information, participation levels within the organization, ability to develop focused, detailed data as opposed to general information, ethical concerns, and sources for foreign and private firms. These themes were apparent from these CI managers' responses:

"How do we motivate employees to contribute data without being asked."

"Finding information on privately held or foreign companies, or on the divisions of a large organization in an ethical manner is difficult."

"Excessive amounts of data can be collected. When do I stop and what do I do with it all?"

"Often, much of the published data, such as government reports, concerns the industry as a whole—it doesn't identify specific companies."

Frequency and type of monitoring. Choosing which information categories to monitor is a key decision for a

THE STUDY

A sample of 172 corporate CI practitioners from the membership of the Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals (SCIP) served as the sample for this study. SCIP is a professional organization with the goals of developing, improving, and promulgating the methods, techniques, and ethical standards of individuals involved in CI. Such individuals include managers with the responsibility for developing a CI function within their business; analysts who are currently conducting CI and feel a need to enhance their current skills and develop new ones; information vendors who want to provide their customers with state-of-the-art products; and academics who teach and research CI topics. However, vendors, academics, and others who were not directly involved in CI activity within a business organization were not part of the sample.

Of the 172 individuals polled, 95 useable questionnaires were returned. Seventy-seven of the 95 firms responding had over $250 million in sales, and 65 of those had sales in excess of one billion dollars. The median number of competitors in the sample firm's industries was 40, with a range of 3 to 4500. The median number of competitors that the sample firms regularly monitored was 12, with a range of 3 to 500. Overall, the sample characteristics reflect a set of firms that are large, relatively successful, and represent a wide variety of industry settings.

CI manager. The categories should represent those activities most relevant to the organization and reflect the mission and needs of the users. Once the categories are outlined, data limitations and time pressures make it imperative to determine the frequency with which those categories should be monitored. Our questionnaire identified fifteen information categories, and the sample respondents rated each of these on a seven-point scale. The seven points were anchored with "continuous/with high frequency" at the high end; "periodic" in the middle of the scale; and "ad hoc/by special request" at the low end.

Exhibit 4 classifies the fifteen categories into three groups (continuous, periodic, ad hoc). The continuous monitoring group contains those categories of information that are the most readily available to the information analyst. These five categories are also those that would be used to assess an industry and its likely evolution.

In the second group are periodically monitored information categories. For example, in the channels of distribution category: 12 percent of the respondents indicated that they did not monitor this activity, while another 12 percent constantly monitored it. Customers, acquisition/divestment practices, and organizational goals and assumptions were classified in the periodic group. However, in each case, approximately 26 percent of the respondents indicated a continuous monitoring of these categories. A possible explanation is that the information categories in this group are highly relevant for a subset of the firms that have advanced CI programs or specific missions that emphasize these information categories.

The third group comprises information categories that are monitored on an ad hoc basis. Of the four categories, the most surprising proved to be supplier practices—55 percent noted that they either do not monitor this category or do so rarely. In practice, this should be an information category that is readily available. In addition, a substantial number of managers stated that they rarely monitor human resources practices (38 percent), general administrative structures (49 percent), and public and international affairs (49 percent). These areas can often be some of the most revealing aspects of a business's ability to implement or change its strategy.

Exhibit 4
Information Categories and Their Monitoring Frequency

Continuous Monitoring	Ad Hoc Monitoring
General Industry Trends	Public and International Affairs
Marketing and Sales	Human Resources
Financial	General Administrative Structure
Technological Development	Supplier and Procurement Practices
Periodic Monitoring	
Organizational Goals and Assumptions	
Customers Acquisition/Divestiture Programs	
Services Provided	
Operations	
Channels of Distribution	

Some representative comments concerning the monitoring of information categories include:

"Recognizing what is important and who needs to know is one of our most difficult problems."

"It's very difficult to obtain information on our competitors' administrative structure and operations."

"With the wave of acquisitions and mergers, keeping current on who owns what, and competitor interrelationships, is very difficult and time consuming."

"Some of our competitors have more than one segment and it is difficult to isolate individual segments in a meaningful way."

The analysis of collected information. After an analytical technique has been applied, two criteria for evaluating the quality of the analysis are whether implications have been developed and if the analysis meets the needs of its users. In this study, we not only evaluated each of the information categories in terms of how frequently data was collected for them, but also on how extensively the information was analyzed.

The extent of analysis was measured on a seven-point scale. A rating of one indicated that the data had been collected and stored in the same form in which they were gathered. A rating of four indicated that a basic analysis had been conducted, such as the plotting of trends, but with the development of few, if any, implications. A rating of seven indicated that the data had been carefully analyzed and specific and extensive implications had been developed.

Exhibit 5 shows how the fifteen information categories have been organized into three groups (Extensive Analysis, Basic Analysis, Little Analysis), representing different levels of analytical sophistication. There are two interesting findings for the extensive analysis group. First, while financial data appear to have been extensively analyzed, the results did not indicate that most firms had developed equally extensive implications. Second, organizational goals and assumptions, which tend to be collected on a periodic basis, seem to have been extensively analyzed, with an emphasis on developing implications.

Three noteworthy findings emerged from the group labeled "Basic Analysis with Few Implications." The technological developments category, which was

Exhibit 5
Extent of Analysis for Information Categories

Extensive Analysis and Implications	Basic Analysis with Few Implications
General Industry Trends	Technological Developments
Potential Competitors	Acquisition/Divestiture Programs
Marketing and Sales	Customers
Financial	Services Provided
Organizational Goals and Assumptions	

Little or No Analysis

Distribution Channels
Human Resources
General Administrative Structure
Public and International Affairs
Supplier Practices

classified in the continuous monitoring group, was placed in the Basic Analysis group. This is because the results tended to suggest that while some firms (19 percent) draw extensive implications, the majority do not. The Acquisition/Divestiture Programs and Customers categories have also been placed in this group even though 24 percent and 30 percent of the survey participants respectively, draw extensive implications although the majority of the sample did not. These three information categories appear to be emphasized by some firms and deemphasized by others.

The third group comprises those information categories for which little or no analysis is done. The Distribution Channels category, which is collected on a periodic basis, appears to be a category for which there are few techniques for analysis. Approximately 50 percent of the sample stated that they rarely if ever (a rating of 1) conduct analysis for the information categories of Human Resources, General Administrative Structures, Public and International Affairs, and Supplier Practices.

Representative comments from the survey participants concerning issues related to analysis include:

"Drawing strategic implications from the available data is one of our biggest problems."

"Digesting and being able to review the 'truckload of information' that is available given the severe time constraints imposed upon us leads to frustration and a lower quality product."

"There is frequently no real audience for ongoing tracking and profiling of our industry and competitors."

Disseminating competitive intelligence. The dissemination of intelligence is a critical process that closes the loop between those who collect and analyze information and those who use it in their decision making. A key feature of the disseminating process is its feedback mechanism. Users can evaluate the relevance, timeliness, and comprehensiveness of the material and assist CI personnel in the enhancement of their efforts. Often, feedback helps to clarify the needs of the users, identify missing pieces of information, and suggest new areas for investigation.

Eleven modes of disseminating intelligence were examined. Each was rated on a seven-point scale as to the extensiveness of use in the organization and its perceived effectiveness. The results, presented in Exhibit 6, reveal several patterns. The use of personal communications was the mode used most often, as well as the most effective.

Several modes of dissemination that have received considerable popular press coverage do not appear to be extensively used in actual business practice. For example, 80 percent of our sample did not use bulletin boards. (An electronic bulletin board with security entry codes is an efficient communications system recently adopted by some leading-edge firms.) Some 35 percent did not have a newsletter, and the 23 percent that used newsletters extensively found them to be only moderately successful. Moreover, 20 percent of the sample did not use computerized data bases—one of the most widely marketed tools of CI.

Training seminars that can be used as a tool for familiarizing managers, sales personnel, and others with the merits of CI were not used by 35 percent of the sample, and were rated as being only moderately effective by those who did use them.

Two summary questions concerning the dissemination of intelligence were presented to the sample. One

Exhibit 6
Modes of Dissemination and Their Perceived Effectiveness

Mode of Dissemination	Usage Rank	% Using Extensiviely	Effectiveness Rank
Personal Interactions	1	60	1
Files in One Location	2	60	5
Custom Reports	3	45	3
Special Memos	4	38	4
Presentations	5	41	2
Computerized Data Bases	6	38	6
Newsletters	7	22	7
Regular Meetings	8	18	9
Training Seminars	9	10	8
Special Retreats	10	3	10
Bulletin Boards	11	1	11

Percent who use extensively is a rating of 6 or 7 on a seven-point scale where 7 = extensively used, and 1 = not used.
Rank of effectiveness is based only on those who use a particular mode. The total sample size was 95.

question asked: "To what degree is the competitive intelligence that is delivered to decision makers timely?" On a seven-point scale, with seven representing "very timely," the average response was five, indicating a moderately high degree of timeliness but considerable room for improvement.

The second question using the same format asked: "Overall, to what extent do other members of the organization believe that competitive intelligence is of value?" The mean response was again five. This indicates that there is some perceived skepticism concerning the benefits and value of CI. It is possible that training seminars and special retreats could become effective methods of heightening awareness and addressing user skepticism. However, it would be imperative to follow these up with effective products and services from the CI staff.

Several of the issues related to the dissemination of intelligence are highlighted by respondents' answers to the following question:

Different users prefer different formats. Some like oral presentations, others prefer written material, some like short reports, others want long, detailed ones. How do you deal with the multiple needs of our users?

"Since we present information about industries and markets that are sometimes unfamiliar to our audience, they often lack 'ownership' or interest."

"I really don't know how long to make the distribution list. Some people feel left out, and then the quality of our overall effort declines!"

"We get very little feedback on what kind of data is desired, which means we run up against attitudes of: 'We already knew,' and 'I'm not interested in that.'"

"Communicating in a timely manner to 3,000 salespeople and 300 market and product managers can be a real headache."

Exhibit 7
Benefits of Competitive Intelligence

Rank Order of Benefits	Average Score	% Rated "Has Helped Considerably"	% Uncertain
Identification of New Business Opportunities	5.2	39	10
Sharing of Ideas	5.0	40	9
Improved Ability to Anticipate Surprises	4.8	27	16
Improving Managers' Analytical Skills	4.7	24	22
Integrating Diverse Ideas	3.8	11	37

Average score is based on the sample of 95 and has a low value of one and a high of seven. "Has helped considerably" indicates a score of six or seven on the seven-point scale.

Benefits and Problems Associated with a Competitive Intelligence Program

The fourth component of a CI program is the perceived benefits and problems associated with producing intelligence for clients.

Benefits. The ultimate evaluation of a CI program can be measured by the return on investment it provides the organization. The extent to which competitive intelligence has contributed to five different types of benefits was evaluated on a seven-point scale. Exhibit 7 shows the rank order of each of the benefits, the percentage of individuals who felt CI has helped considerably (a six or seven on the scale), and the percentage of those polled who were uncertain of the effect. The identification of new business opportunities and the sharing of ideas appear to be the most beneficial outcomes of CI efforts. One unexpected result was that 16 percent indicated that they were uncertain if CI improved managers' ability to anticipate surprises.

Problems. The CI job requires a high degree of interaction with all levels of the organization hierarchy. The interaction with individuals throughout the organization requires a delicate balancing act since their needs, understanding of, and commitment to CI vary considerably. (See Exhibit 8.)

Several of the representative comments concerning problems associated with the CI function are:

Exhibit 8
Problems Associated with Competitive Intelligence Programs

Problem Areas	Average Score	% Who Strongly Agreed
Shortage of CI personnel.	5.2	48
No incentive to share information.	5.1	51
Integrating intelligence into the decision-making process.	5.0	37
Limited feedback on the effectiveness of CI activity.	4.6	29
Managers not aware of CI purpose.	4.4	28
Internal political obstacles.	4.3	28
Limited interaction with end users.	4.1	28
No champion for CI activities.	4.1	27
Managers do not use CI provided to them.	3.9	16
Legal and ethical issues.	2.8	9

Average score is based on a sample of 95 and has a low score of one and a high of seven. Percent who strongly agreed represents a score of six or seven on a seven-point scale.

"Large, comprehensive competitive intelligence programs can collapse under their own weight. Flexibility, usefulness, timeliness, and cross-functional cooperation are characteristics of a successful project-based competitive intelligence program."

"Sometimes there's a lack of support and understanding from top management. There appears to be little appreciation for the time and effort required to obtain quality information."

"Encouraging people to participate is difficult. The result is that there's a lot of inadvertent duplication of effort with other internal groups and a wealth of information is not shared."

"Keeping our 'name' in front of line management is a constant battle."

"We lack a staff to cover our existing and potential workload because management does not fully understand the nature of our job."

Developing CI Programs

From the results of this study and our observations we can suggest several tentative principles for competitive intelligence programs:

1. Institutionalize competitive analysis. No longer is competitive analysis strictly the job of a formal unit. It is now widely recognized that all members of an organization, from the president to the custodial staff, are valuable intelligence agents who should be sensitized to the role of such information, to participate in its collection and analysis, and to use it wherever this is appropriate.

2. Competitive intelligence should be project based. Large, comprehensive competitive intelligence programs can collapse under their own weight. Flexibility, usefulness, timeliness, and cross-functional cooperation are characteristics of a successful project-based competitive intelligence program.

3. Intelligence personnel should be results oriented. Competitive intelligence personnel are often underutilized as a result of being misperceived primarily as information gatherers. In a growing number of companies, competitive intelligence personnel are involved in all phases of intelligence projects. Such involvement results in more clearly defined intelligence objectives and assists in the development of strategic and tactical implications.

4. No research finding stands alone. Each new finding from a competitive analysis project should be integrated into a "knowledge bank." It should modify or reinforce what you already know. Emphasis should be placed on identifying findings that complement each other as well as those that conflict. Only through such a process is it possible to convert information into competitive intelligence that you truly believe in.

5. Recognize decision makers' "comfort zones." Decision makers typically have a set of expectations, or "comfort zones," underlying a competitive analysis project. For example, marketing executives at a leading manufacturer of heavy trucks firmly believed that their primary competitive advantage was driver comfort and safety. Yet the company's intelligence reports suggested that, in fact, their trucks were rated very poorly in these areas. Unfortunately, rather than being used as input for improvement, these findings were dismissed as inaccurate, despite a very carefully designed study.

Analysts must recognize how entrenched decision makers' comfort zones are and design their presentations to meet expected difficulties. When findings appear to deviate greatly from expectations, analysts can increase the likelihood that their findings will be accepted by describing them as "preliminary," and by actively soliciting possible explanations. Such actions often serve to cushion the blow, and allow decision makers to deal with the findings creatively, even if the data doesn't agree with previous expectations. □

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