



What Is Effective Intelligence?

Insights generated by the Competitive Intelligence (CI) unit in an organization are qualified as effective if they project the seven essential features of successful intelligence activities, which are the true hallmarks of CI work.

These features include (a) accuracy and reliability of derived information, (b) application of ethics and principles in the conduct of intelligence activities, (c) good critical analysis and interpretation of intelligence for decision-making, (d) development of concise and compelling reports, (e) the prompt and efficient distribution of information, (f) impact of the findings on business plans and strategies, and (g) balancing positive implications with counter-measures for negative ones.

Accurate and Reliable

In today's Digital Age, when information comes freely on the internet and social media, it is imperative for the CI team to discern whether an acquired information is true or not. Normally, information from a primary source – obtained directly through interviews or email correspondence – has more weight in terms of accuracy than a quote lifted from a blog, or hearsay information, or other types of un-validated sources online.

All information must be validated thoroughly before being accepted to be true. The best practice for information authentication is to compare the inputs from at least 2 or 3 sources that are independent, objective and authoritative. This means that the sources must not know or

have direct influence on each other, must not hold any bias towards the information being sought, and must have subject-matter expertise.

Ethical and Principled

Blame it on James Bond, or Jason Bourne. The unknowing public seems to have the wrong impression about the CI profession that links it to spy-craft. This notion needs to be challenged. And part of having a successful intelligence function is to ensure that all its activities adhere to ethical standards and lawful business practices. A properly and professionally trained intelligence team understands that illicit data gathering techniques are really unnecessary. The Strategy and Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP), provides a useful reference for ethical CI behavior, which can be found on the scip.org website. However, here is a much simpler rule: do not lie, cheat, steal or deceive to get information.

Critical Thinking

Information only becomes intelligence when it is analyzed, processed, and presented in a way that is relevant to the business decision it is supposed to support. A smart CI team should be armed with the right analytical tools and critical thinking processes, in order to determine which information to use, and how best to interpret it, for maximum impact on the decision-making process of the organization. Having an intelligence team with a robust data collection capability and deep analytical thinking process, capable of producing streams of actionable insights, can be a source of competitive advantage for the company.

Succinct and Persuasive

The output of the intelligence effort must be concise, compelling and directly address the key questions put forth by the decision-maker. As much as possible, only relevant information must be reported so as not to waste valuable management time. As a general rule, a useful intelligence report will contain all the critical answers within the first 2 pages, with more detailed explanation in the next 5 pages, while all supporting data and analysis placed in the attachment section.

Timely Distribution

A comprehensively researched intelligence report, meticulously prepared, and thoroughly analyzed will be rendered useless if it does not reach its intended audience when it is needed. Timeliness is almost as important as quality. The intelligence team must be cognizant of executive decision deadline and must learn to balance the desire for completion with the time-urgency of the requirement. In some instances, getting perfect information a day late will be useless for decision-making.

Actionable Insights

The ultimate value of any intelligence effort is that the insights produced should enrich the company's future plans and strategies, giving it an edge over competition or

improve its position in the market. The measure of intelligence worth is when it is applied to create positive change in company performance and results. The intelligence should provide a competitive advantage for the company so that it will win in any arena or game that it chooses to play.

Preventive and Preemptive

Beyond identifying potential opportunities and promising prospects, the CI team should also be able to forecast upcoming downsides or risks in the marketplace. The role of devil's advocate should be embraced by the intelligence team also. While no one wants this job, someone has to perform it. Black hat thinking might just save the company during times of crisis brought about by external forces – like the entry of new competitors, or shifting customer preferences and market behavior, or even adverse regulatory policies. When addressed proactively, even negative information may be turned into an opportunity by the CI team that knows how to effectively monitor and analyze them, then alert management with enough time for proper action.

How effective is your intelligence team?

Actelligos is a market and competitive intelligence company with 20 years of experience in the Asia Pacific region.

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