

The Skills of Competitive Intelligence Practitioners: Complementing the Cycle of Competitive Intelligence

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Abstract

Essentially, this paper endeavours to explore the specific skills that would make up the skills sets for the competitive intelligence practitioners throughout the competitive intelligence phases for the product of competitive advantage. Thus, by outlining the competitive intelligence skills based on the competitive intelligence cycle, the readers will be served with a larger depiction of competitive intelligence in view of the fact that processes and activities cannot be conducted without prior existence of competencies and proficiencies.

Keywords: Competitive intelligence process, Competitive intelligence skills, training

Introduction

According to The Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP), competitive intelligence can be defined as the process of ethically collecting, analyzing, and disseminating accurate, relevant, specific, timely, foresighted and actionable intelligence regarding the implications of the business environment, the competitors, and the organization itself. In addition, an effective competitive intelligence process signifies the competitive intelligence phases which are run in a continuous cycle that is called as competitive intelligence cycle. Hence, it is vital for the organizations that are paying serious attention to the generation of competitive intelligence to comprehend that all phases in the competitive intelligence cycle are interrelated and the success of the one will determine the success of the other. Thus, the competitive intelligence practitioners which have been assigned by the organization to conduct one or more phases in the competitive intelligence cycle need to be fortified with the necessary skills.

Competitive Intelligence Skills

Consequently, a specific set of skills is required by the competitive intelligence practitioners to effectively and efficiently conduct and work on different phases of competitive intelligence (McLellan, 2001). Hence, it is enriched to derive the competitive intelligence skills that are required for every competitive intelligence phases in order to complement the competitive intelligence cycle. Specifically, the competitive intelligence cycle includes the phases of planning and focus, collection, analysis, communication, process and structure, organizational awareness and culture, as well as skills development.

Planning and Focus Phase

Essentially, the planning and focus phase in the competitive intelligence cycle is prerequisite to set required and needed resources for the competitive intelligence project or competitive intelligence process as well as to establish the purpose and result of the findings (Dishman and Calof, 2008).

Therefore, the first skill which needs to be considered by the competitive intelligence practitioners in the planning and focus phase throughout the competitive intelligence cycle is analytical skill. In basis, the competitive intelligence practitioners will need to work with the potential clients to discover their intelligence needs and requirements and then translating those needs and requirements into their specific intelligence requirements or Key Intelligence Topics (KITs). Essentially, KITs are those topics which are identified to be the greatest significance to the senior executives in the organization and which are identified to provide purpose and direction for competitive intelligence operations (Bose, 2008). Strategic decisions and actions, early-warning topics, and descriptions of key marketplace players will be included in the KITs. Thus, the analytical skills of the competitive intelligence practitioners will provide the foundation on identifying and meeting the specific needs of management for planned decisions or pending actions, stressing the activities and the subjects by which management does not want to be staggered, as well as reflecting the needs of management team or manager. Particularly, KITs generates Key Intelligence Questions (KIQs) that provides specific questions on which competitive intelligence processes will be conducted (Correia, 2006) in which produce the intelligence indicator and facilitate the identification of information sources. Thus, the analytical skills of the competitive intelligence practitioners will also provide the foundation on directing the information collection to be analysed and translated into competitive intelligence.

The second skill is interviewing skill. This is because an effective competitive intelligence processes require regular interview session with the executives in the organization to truly understand their needs and requirements (Toit, 2003). Generally, it is crucial for the competitive intelligence practitioners to develop and improve their interviewing skills in order to ensure that the potential clients are willing to give full co-operation during the planning of information collection and information analysis that involves the use of KITs and KIQs.

Collection Phase

Essentially, the collection phase in the competitive intelligence cycle refers to the activities and processes which involve the identification of all the potential sources of data and information, the task of ethically and legally researching and gathering the right data and information, as well as the organization of the data and information into an ordered form and arrangement (Bose, 2008).

Therefore, the first skill which needs to be considered by the competitive intelligence practitioners in the collection phase throughout the competitive intelligence cycle is research skill. In basis, the competitive intelligence practitioners should know how to ensure the validity and reliability of data and information sources (Strauss and Toit, 2010). In addition, the competitive intelligence practitioners should know how to differentiate between hypothesised and open assumptions (Muller, 2000; Heppes, 2006). Thus, these two conditions can only be achieved and reached if the competitive intelligence practitioners possessed and owned the research skill. It is because the research skills of the competitive intelligence practitioners will assist to acquire and organize the collected data and information into the functional form and representation.

Besides that, the second skill is networking skill. This is due to the fact that not all the results can be generated from the published resources and the best results can be generated from the human contact too (Strauss and Toit, 2010). Human sources are not only giving the relevant information but also explaining the pertinent implications and significances. If they cannot act as the provider of information, they may be able to act as the provider of direction to information such as researchers or someone else who has that particular information. However, the networking skill must blends well with the communication skills and ethics.

Last but not least, the third skill is analytical skill. In basis, since the output of planning and direction phase is KITs, the competitive intelligence practitioners should ensure that the information collection processes and activities should be tailored to that KITs. Thus, the analytical skills of the competitive intelligence practitioners will verify how clear the potential clients expressing their needs and requirements of competitive intelligence during the planning and focus phase. If it is not clear, it can be expressed all over again. Moreover, the analytical skills of the competitive intelligence practitioners support when and how the competitive intelligence practitioners will make it possible to provide the information from the available collection sources.

Analysis Phase

Essentially, the analysis phase in the competitive intelligence cycle involves the process and activities to turn raw data (a collection of facts, figures, and statistics relating to business operations) into actionable intelligence (data organized and interpreted to reveal underlying patterns, trends, and interrelationships) (Bose, 2008).

Therefore, the first skill which needs to be considered by the competitive intelligence practitioners in the analysis phase throughout the competitive intelligence cycle is critical analysis skill. The competitive intelligence practitioners should be skilled in applying basic analysis methods (Heppes, 2006) to generate the competitive intelligence for the competitive advantage of the organization. Thus, the competitive intelligence practitioners that owned the analysis skills must be familiar with the fundamental forms of analysis which are 1) deduction, 2) induction 3) pattern recognition, and 4) trend analysis. Complementary, the competitive intelligence practitioners that owned the analysis skills must also be familiar with the tools and techniques to perform the intelligence analysis which are 1) inductive reasoning, 2) deductive reasoning, and 3) pattern recognition. In essence, inductive reasoning is the ability to combine pieces of specific information or answers to problems, to form general rules or conclusions. It involves the ability to ponder the relevant and possible reasons for why things go together. It also involves the process of establishing logical explanation for a series of events that appear unrelated. On the other hand, deductive reasoning is the ability to apply general rules to specific problems to arise with logical resolution. It involves the decision whether the resolution makes any sense. Contraries, pattern recognition is the ability to identify or detect a known pattern (a figure, word, or object) that is hidden in other material. However, even though the computerized competitive intelligence aids assist the competitive intelligence practitioners to conduct and analyze the large data collection, it is represented that the data analysis is highly dependent on the non-computerized competitive intelligence methodologies to conduct and analyze the data collection for the final conversion of data to intelligence. Thus, the competitive intelligence practitioners that possessed the analysis skills also must be familiar with the strategic analytical techniques including the SWOT analysis, value chain analysis, strategic group analysis, industry analysis (Porters Five Forces Model), BCG growth/share portfolio matrix, GE business screen matrix, and financial ratios. All in all, it can be observed that both computerized and non-computerized analysis tools are essential to enable the placement of collected data and information within the useful context for strategic action and decision.

The second skill is critical interpretation skills. The competitive intelligence practitioners should be skilled in making an educated guess and placing appropriate approach to place the situation in context. This is due to the fact that the good competitive intelligence practitioners should not only rely on facts, but also upon their own intuition and imaginative sources (Strauss and Toit, 2010). For example, if the competitive intelligence practitioners believe that the information on human resources can be used for the context of marketing, the competitive intelligence practitioners can proceed on appropriate analysis. However, it is necessary to avoid from immature views, stereotypical thinking, immoderate secrecy, ideological belief, doctrine, bias, history's superficial lessons, culture's projection, people's expectations, and evidence's ignorance (Heppes, 2006). All in all, the interpretation skill must blends well with the critical analysis skills.

Communication phase

Fundamentally, the communication phase in the competitive intelligence cycle exist since the results or products of competitive intelligence need to be communicated to the potential clients especially to those with authority and responsible to act on the findings (Dishman and Calof, 2008). However, the ways of communicating the results or products of competitive intelligence and the frequency of the results or products of competitive intelligence to the potential clients will differ from one another depending on the intelligence requirements of the recipients and the precise nature of the information (Weiss, 2002).

The first skill which needs to be considered by the competitive intelligence practitioners in the communication phase throughout the competitive intelligence cycle is critical dissemination skills. The competitive intelligence practitioners must have the capabilities to select the appropriate format and suitable media as well as the capabilities to deliver organized and summarized findings to the potential clients. Essentially, communication can be oral via telephone, meetings, and presentation or written via e-mails bulletins, report or analysis produced as printed documents, and corporate intranet (Weiss, 2002). In fact, communication can take place via ad hoc reports, alerts, e-mails, presentations, news briefs, competitor files and special memos (Fleisher, 2001). Therefore, the format and media of findings will depends on the alignment of user requirements that being establish at the earlier phase since the alignment of user requirements outline the answers on how the intelligence will be communicated and to whom it will be delivered. It is no point to disseminate the results or products of competitive intelligence in a long document but the salient data and information cannot be forwarded.

The second skill is persuasive presentation skills. The competitive intelligence practitioners should present the findings to the potential clients in an unemotional and objective manner (Strauss and Toit, 2010). In addition, the competitive intelligence practitioners should also present the findings to the potential clients accompany by the action of refraining from presenting self-perceptions, unchallenged statements, bias, and wishful thinking (Strauss and Toit, 2010). This is to ensure that the competitive intelligence practitioners can persuasively, assertively, and diplomatically presents the results and products of competitive intelligence in view of the fact that the potential clients must be convinced with the validity and reliability of the findings for further actions.

Process and structure, organisational awareness and culture as well as skills development phase

In the process and structure phase, the appropriate policies and procedures as well as informal and formal infrastructure for the competitive intelligence will be required and developed (Strauss and Toit, 2010; Saayman et. al, 2008) in order to ensure that the employees can contribute to the competitive intelligence system as well as gain benefits from the competitive intelligence processes according to the organization's desires. This should be communicated to the employees so that the organizational culture of competitiveness and the organizational awareness on competitive intelligence can be established within the organization. The most important thing, the concept of competitive intelligence should be part of every employee's job description within the business to embed competitive intelligence practice in the organizational structure.

In the organizational awareness phase, the appropriate organizational awareness of competitive intelligence and the culture of competitiveness will be required and developed in order to ensure that the organization will be able to utilize the competitive intelligence for the competitive advantage. However, the organizational awareness of competitive intelligence and the culture of competitiveness should be sustained by the supporting mechanisms (Murphy, 2005) that help the employees to identify the competitive intelligence inside and outside the organization. This is because to promote the awareness of the employees towards the competitive intelligence there must be appropriate and sufficient tools, methodologies, activities, and processes. For example, the organization can subscribe to relevant information aggregators for competitive intelligence unit to support competitive intelligence practice. The organization also can provide analysis tools in computerized and non-computerized based analysis as well as communication channels in computerized based dissemination for competitive intelligence unit to support competitive intelligence practice.

All in all, the skills development phase throughout the competitive intelligence cycle can be fostered through training. It is because training clear up the misconceptions regarding competitive intelligence, promote the communication advantages, instil the competitive intelligence awareness, as well as allow the transfer of competitive intelligence expertise and skills (Muller, 2002). This definitely helps the employees to identify their functions and roles in competitive intelligence practice through training. However, training must be initiated according to the identified needs of the organization. Hence, the most basic training that can be initiated includes the guidelines on information collection, information analysis methods and techniques, as well as management of briefing sessions (Muller, 2002). Therefore, training can contribute to the success of each phase in the cycle of competitive intelligence since the competitive intelligence training will be aligned to the development and improvement of competitive intelligence practitioners' skills throughout the competitive intelligence cycle.

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