



Scenarios for Competitive Intelligence

The Outward Insights Staff



The practice of competitive intelligence has changed significantly over the past 10 years, and, as we bring the 2010 to a close, the Outward Insights consulting staff thought it would be fun to speculate what the CI profession might look like 10 years from now. Given our disdain for predicting the future, we have developed four mini-scenarios depicting plausible ways in which the CI profession might change in the next decade.

CI Diffusion. In the year 2020, competitive intelligence no longer exists as a distinct business profession. Instead, the need for assessing and anticipating external competitive threats and opportunities is part of most other corporate functions -- the cumulation of a trend that started in the late 2000s. In 2020, it is the job of market researchers, product managers, technology developers, and sales reps to continuously know, evaluate, and strategize for competitive, regulatory, technological, and other market developments. These professionals are on their own, striving and struggling to learn methods and techniques for doing so. They are aided by advanced technologies that make it possible to know competitor moves in real time, primarily from their personal business and social networks, blogs, and other sources (the concept of business journals and industry press reports died out long ago). Long-range strategic planning is a thing of the past because business conditions are too volatile to think much beyond the next quarter, further diminishing the need for dedicated, strategic CI practitioners.

Won't Be Fooled Again. In 2020, CI is bigger and better than ever. The boom times that followed the long and slow economic recovery between 2010 and 2013 made managers realize that they never again wanted to live through an economic crisis of the magnitude of the Great Recession. Companies that decimated their CI teams in the early 2010s decided to double-down on CI several years later, and created corporate CI staffs with ample budgets, talented teams, and the latest technologies. In 2020, not only do senior executives expect the best strategic thinking from their CI shops, they listen to their advice and incorporate CI judgments into strategic planning and all major business decisions. A company's best and brightest now work in strategic CI functions,

such assignments are considered plum, and CI staffs become breeding grounds for future executive promotions.

Thanks, But No Thanks. Middle managers who lived through the tumult of the Great Recession in 2020 occupy the ranks of senior management. They carry with them a strong perception that their company's competitive intelligence teams missed the financial crisis, and as a result carry a disdain for CI. As a result, corporate CI staffs are not only scaled back, they are eliminated, and nothing takes their place. Companies hire third-party research firms to simply amass and organize data -- such as detailed product and service comparisons, encyclopedic competitor profiles, and massive industry assessments -- with the new class of senior executives relying on their own analysis and assessment of this data, thank you very much.

CI Automation. The advances in information technology, analytic systems, and artificial intelligence result in not only a complete outsourcing of competitive intelligence, but a false reliance on computer-generated analysis and early warning. Companies spend heavily on new technologies that promise to monitor, communicate, and evaluate all aspects of external market uncertainty -- competitor strategy and intent, early warning developments, emerging industry structures and trends. Executives rely on dashboards and minute-by-minute alerts that come from expert systems being managed and housed in low-cost offshore locations (not India any more as wages there have skyrocketed, but instead in Nigeria, Vietnam, and the Philippines).

Scenarios such as these become meaningful only if organizations use them to develop contingency plans that help prepare for whatever the future throws at them. For the CI profession, perhaps these scenarios can fuel practitioners own evaluation of how CI might evolve at their companies, and what plans they should put in place now to be ready for whatever the next 10 years bring.

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