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Research vs. Intelligence

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AS A CI PRACTITIONER, YOUR inbox is undoubtedly filled with “research requests” – everything from the hot topic of the day, to investigations of new competitor products and verifications of the latest rumors. But how do you know if the research will truly add value to your organization? Are these strategic requests or an exercise in futility? How do you separate the “need to know” from the “nice to know”?

Here are four ways for you to know whether the information your department is collecting is simply “research” or valuable intelligence.

- (1) *The information does not affect any of the company’s specific strategic plans, decisions, or actions.* Prior to dedicating time and resources to a research project, it is important to understand why the information ensuing analysis is important, how the insights will be used and how they are connected to the company’s strategic goals. All too often, companies embark on random fact-finding missions that ultimately have no strategic value. Those tasked with developing true intelligence must ensure that all stakeholders are clear as to how the assessment will enhance or change the company’s strategic plans and/or decisions.
- (2) *The information collected is a result of “environmental scanning” without analytical frameworks.* It is common for companies to institute monthly industry monitoring efforts with the intention of “staying abreast” of the competition. However, these programs often lack analytical frameworks, which prevent internal clients from making immediate judgments about the data that’s being presented. Often, the data is organized as little more than a series of events that have occurred over a specific time period (weekly, monthly, quarterly). However, there is rarely any strategic context associated with the data. Establishing very specific criteria that determines what information is collected, and avoiding the collection of any and all information that occurs within a pre-determined time frame, help to sort out the more valuable content from the rest
- (3) *It does not provide forward-looking insights.* Many companies initiate research projects that simply provide information on how a competitor used to or currently performs an activity. And while this information is helpful in understanding how a company operates, it does little to provide insight into anticipating competitors’ future moves.

Information that leads to the generation of future-oriented hypotheses is a key difference between mere data collection and intelligence. Forward looking intelligence equips companies with the ability stay one step ahead of competitors by providing them with the insight that will feed competitive counter strategies and which prevent them from being blind-sided by competitor moves. By consistently reporting on and analyzing current or historical competitor activities without providing judgments and/or hypotheses as to how these events will shape future competitor moves will leave a company vulnerable to competitive attacks.

- (4) *No one reads it.* One relatively simple way to know whether the information your department is providing is valuable or not is to take a quick poll to see what who is actually reading the reports! I bet many would be surprised to learn the percentage of their internal clients who merely skim through CI reports or hardly read them at all. One common reason for this is that many internal clients are never asked what they deem important. When was the last time someone met with your stakeholders to understand their key challenges? How often are those issues reflected in your on-going or ad-hoc reports? If these issues are addressed, are you also providing insights that clearly outline how your stakeholders (not just the company in general) are affected (the “so what”)? Ensure that you are consistently meeting with your stakeholders to ensure that you still have your finger on the pulse of their CI needs and that you are providing analytical insights and judgments that will support the strategic decisions they need to make.

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