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Competitive Insight: Using Analytic Teams to your Advantage

Using teams to help develop or support competitive intelligence analysis offers several advantages to analysts and their organizations. A team is a group of people linked by a common purpose. A sports team, for example, is assembled to win sporting contests. Typically, team members have complementary skills, which collectively enable them to accomplish something they could not achieve individually.

In the world of competitive intelligence (CI), an analytic team is a group of people with complementary skills who are brought together to study a complex competitive issue. The benefits of teams can be harvested only when the work itself requires that people actually work together to achieve some collective purpose.

WHY USE TEAMS?

Because most CI analysts struggle with too much work and too little time, using already scarce time and resources to assemble and manage analytic teams must be justified. What follows are some of the possible benefits analytic teams have to offer.

Produce better intelligence. Even the most talented and experienced intelligence analyst needs help with complex analyses. After all, none of us has access to every information source

or viewpoint. Collaborative analysis helps you flesh out additional perspectives that may not occur to you on your own. You may also find new sources and data that were not previously known to you.

Create credibility and buy-in. In some organizations CI analysts are not perceived as experts. If that's your situation, you can use properly assembled teams of internal experts to help substantiate conclusions and strengthen credibility with management. By delivering timely updates, objective analyses, and thoughtful recommendations, the competitive intelligence teams earned credibility with senior management.

Strengthen internal networks. Effective internal networks are a prerequisite to running a successful competitive intelligence function, but finding opportunities to cultivate networks is not easy. Bringing together a group of co-workers to help develop or validate a CI analysis provides an excellent opportunity to interface with key co-workers and enhance internal relationships.

FORMING TEAMS

Choose members of an analytic team from key areas of the organization with their expertise and contacts in mind. Before making your selection, identify

the expertise or skills needed and then pick co-workers with those traits. In assembling your ad hoc team, don't restrict participation to CI team members. If you have a financial question, you probably want a finance person at the table.

Inform your management before you contact potential team members. In some organizations it may be appropriate to contact the managers of prospective team members to seek their permission.

Teams generally function best when they consist of three to eight people, as smaller groups lose the team advantages, and managing larger groups can be difficult. If the team gets larger than about eight people, it will be too big to sit in a room together and have an informal conversation, cutting off the give-and-take debate that generates a lot of the group's insights.

MANAGING TEAMS

As team leader, you set the agenda and tone. During your first contact (typically an invitation to join the team), tell each member why the team is being formed, what the team will do, who will be involved, where and when the team will convene, and what will be expected of them. As a courtesy, you might also tell them what kind of commitment you expect (number of meetings, expected hours, etc.).

Be organized and assertive during team meetings. Define the competitive issue(s) clearly and concisely, review the agenda, and stick to it. Lead the discussion, but defer to team members – especially in their areas of expertise. Keep discussions on target and limit meetings to pre-stated lengths. Establish an easy way for team members to communicate between meetings through a message board, instant messenger, file sharing, or chat room, for example.

If the team arrives at a conclusion different from yours, don't try to force your conclusion on them. Instead, find a compromise that will allow input from group members yet maintain the key points of your conclusion. It's possible the compromise conclusion will be more accurate, or more acceptable, to management.

Acknowledge all team members (even those who don't attend meetings or contribute during meetings) in communications with the team, your manager, and management. Pay special attention (publicly and privately) to

those who made special contributions.

Express your gratitude to team members. Thank them for participating, attending meetings, and contributing. By doing so, you will encourage them to say positive things about you and increase the likelihood that they will help you again in the future.

SUMMARY

Developing or participating on teams to produce or support analysis is an essential competency of CI professionals. Teams made up of co-workers with expertise in pertinent areas can help intelligence analysts develop better solutions, strengthen internal networks, and create credibility and buy-in with management. Forming and managing analytic teams can also be a growth experience for CI analysts.

Handpick team members with expertise or skills representing key areas of the organization. Manage the team by setting a clear agenda and appropriate tone. Then remain organized and assertive during

meetings. You may have to compromise, especially if the team arrives at a different solution than yours. Acknowledge team members and pay special attention to those who made extra contributions.

When done properly, using teams to help with intelligence analysis can be a rewarding experience for CI analysts and their organizations. I hope that's the case for you.

About the Author:

*Dale Fehring is currently a freelance writer and editor. As vice-president market intelligence, he started and managed the competitive intelligence function at Visa International and served on the SCIP Board of Directors and Education Advisory Committee. Dale edited the Competitive Intelligence Foundation's **Competitive Intelligence Ethics** book and the **State of the Art: Competitive Intelligence** (Both can be purchased through the [SCIP Bookstore](#)). He can be reached at dalefehinger@hotmail.com.*