

The Maturity of the Competitive Intelligence Function

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Abstract

When identifying or comparing organizations with a competitive intelligence function, one should first identify their competitive intelligence systems and then classify the maturity of their competitive intelligence functions. This paper presents four different classification levels based on different focus from different authors.

Introduction

Most organizations already perform some kind of competitive intelligence (Fleisher, 2004; Kahaner, 1996). The question is do they perform it in a systematic way? A manager that often uses the internet as a source of information for his daily decisions or uses this one time to collect information about a competitor, which after analyzed, help the manager to make a strategic decision; is competitive intelligence being performed here? Can we consider that this organization has a competitive intelligence system implemented? Is there a competitive intelligence function present in this organization? Nowadays, individuals in organizations regularly gather and analyze

information in their everyday tasks. Ever since the internet has become present in everyone's lives, this ordinary gesture of consulting the internet as the world's largest database is present in the mind of every person. However, two issues must be discussed. Is the act of collecting and analyzing information exclusively part of a competitive intelligence function? And being performed by individuals in an organization, can this organization be considered to have a competitive intelligence function? Therefore, a line must be drawn between those organizations which possess a competitive intelligence function and those which do not. That line can be established by considering the definition and the maturity of the competitive intelligence function. This paper addresses the maturity of the competitive intelligence function in an organization, along with the implications that surround most of the concepts involved.

Literature Review

Definitions

First of all, competitive intelligence is a supporting decision-making management tool (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). This notion should not be forgotten neither by those in the competitive intelligence function nor by the management or other clients in the organization. One of the most complete definitions of competitive intelligence has been published by Fleisher (2004):

‘Competitive intelligence is the systematic process by which organizations ethically gather and analyze actionable information about competitors and the competitive environment and, ideally, apply it to their decision-making and planning processes to improve their performance. The systematic process used in developing competitive intelligence products is commonly known as the intelligence cycle and progresses through a recurring set of steps including planning, data gathering, analysis, and dissemination.’ (p.56)

The systematic characteristic of competitive intelligence is present in several other publications (Hall & Lundberg, 2010; Hirvensalo, 2004; Kahaner, 1996; Walle, 1999; Whitehead, 2002) as a mandatory statement. In fact, using an organized plan in the competitive intelligence process is what allows organizations to state having a

competitive intelligence function. However, this process should be conducted legally and ethically (Calof, 1998; Heppes & du Toit, 2009; Schultz et al, 1994; Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). There is an ethical code for competitive intelligence professionals, with a special emphasis on what not to do. For a long time, competitive intelligence has been compared to industrial espionage and national intelligence services (Bensoussan & Densham, 2004; Calof, 1998; Schultz et al, 1994; Sonnecken, 1960). If one looks at the history competitive intelligence, one can easily understand why. One of the oldest books (Alden et al, 1959) on competitive intelligence is based on the work of nine students of the Harvard Business School on information, espionage, and decision-making (Sonnecken, 1960). In fact, competitive intelligence is based on the military model of intelligence gathering and evaluation (Schultz et al, 1994). Nevertheless, strategic management is also based on the model of military strategy; know the ground and the forces involved (Barros, 1993). Does this make strategic management an unethical or illegal activity? Another view of competitive intelligence history is the one which evolves from marketing intelligence, very popular in the sixties (Walle, 1999). All the same, nowadays, competitive intelligence authors continue to establish relationships between organizational competitive intelligence and national intelligence services. According to Sawka (2010), good intelligence, whenever produced by corporate or government intelligence services, can be translated to knowing about those with whom they interact. Their capabilities – what are they capable of doing? Their intentions – what do they want to do? And their unanticipated events – what could happen after they act? To prevent making the wrong assumptions about competitive intelligence, Whitehead (2002) stated that

‘Competitive intelligence is not a crystal ball, spying, database queries, a replacement for marketing research or information technology, a computer system, a book of facts, spectacular, instant, [and] free.’ (p.1)

In fact, competitive intelligence is not a management perspective, neither is it a management views on strategy, or a management theory of some kind. Competitive intelligence is simply

‘A systematic program for gathering and analyzing information about your competitor’s activities and general business trends to further your own company’s goals.’

(Kahaner 1996: p.16)

To best assess competitive intelligence, one should understand the difference between information and intelligence. Information, along with raw data, is numbers, statistics and does not provide anyone with an actionable option. Information lacks the use of filters, distillers and analysis. Intelligence is an assortment of information pieces that have been previously filtered and properly analyzed. Intelligence is what managers depend on to make good decisions (Kahaner, 1996).

Another issue that should be comprehended about competitive intelligence is that it is not a function. Competitive intelligence is a process that should appear in every aspects of the organization, rather than relegated to this one area or division (Kahaner, 1996). Competitive intelligence activities should be transversal to the whole organization, and according to Walle (1999) should serve all business functions. In fact, organizations must understand competitive intelligence as a support tool for management in implementing tactics to compete, differentiate, reduce costs and risks, and generate revenue (Whitehead, 2002). Furthermore, as an illustrated example, competitive intelligence can provide intelligence to answer the following questions from the several organizational functions: Marketing – What new substitutes or consumer trends might threaten our brand loyalty? Finance – What emerging business opportunities are venture capitalists investing in? Human resources – What new competencies are required to build new corporate capabilities? Sales – What emerging sales channels are available to attract traditional and new customers? Research and development – How do leading players structure their knowledge management and management information systems? Or in what new science and technology directions are they heading towards? (Whitehead, 2002) As you can see, competitive intelligence is more than a simple tool to assess competitors. However, although Neugarten (2003) and Whitehead (2002) also used the term competitive intelligence process, many other authors refer to competitive intelligence in an organization as a function (Eddleton, 2010; Fleisher, 2004; Heppes & du Toit, 2009; Hirvensalo, 2004; Sawka, 2009a; Sawka, 2010; Walle, 1999). Whether competitive intelligence can or cannot be

addressed as an organizational function, it can be explained through the organizational structure. Regardless what traditional organizational structure is established – centralized or vertical, matrix, horizontal, divisional or hybrid structure (King, 1999) – competitive intelligence activities should be positioned in order to facilitate the reception of the intelligence requests and the dissemination of the intelligence produced. Nowadays, with a good internal workflow or a good competitive intelligence system, these issues do not stop the intelligence flow even through traditional communications channels. Thus, it is not the actual position of competitive intelligence in the organization that matters, it is the functional aspect. Therefore, and for the purpose of this paper, the term competitive intelligence function will continue to be used. Nevertheless the statement of Kahaner (1996) will be permanently taken under consideration. In sum, competitive intelligence function is the section or department of an organization that produces and delivers intelligence to the top management or to other customers. All aspects of the business and all other sections or departments in the organization are potential subjects or clients to the competitive intelligence function. The difference between a function and a system is that the system is the way the elements or the components of the function operate together. After a competitive intelligence system is implemented, a competitive intelligence function exists and one can address the issue of its maturity. Being maturity a very advanced or develop form or state, maturity of the competitive intelligence function relates to the level of maturation of the function or the process of becoming completely developed. These issues of the competitive intelligence system and the maturity of the competitive intelligence function are discussed in the following sections of this paper.

The Intelligence Cycle

As a continuous process, competitive intelligence is simply composed by four steps that transform raw information into intelligence. The steps are (1) the planning and direction, (2) the collection, (3) the analysis, and (4) the dissemination, as show in Figure 1. This is the classic intelligence cycle. Basically, one identifies what kind of intelligence the management or the client requires and chooses their course of action in fulfilling the request. Then a gathering of raw information is processed, alongside with the respective storage, nowadays, mostly in an electronic format. The next step is the most difficult to execute. An extensive analysis is under way with the objective of

finding patterns and trends. Scenarios can be also created when futures events are not yet determined. Finally, the last step involves the distribution of the intelligence to the ones who required it the first step. Often, this step originates a new cycle. Calof (1998) mentions a fifth step, which is the management of the intelligence process. Fuld & Sawka (2000) also propose a slightly different cycle by dividing the last step of the classic intelligence cycle into two: Report and inform; and Evaluate and refine. This last half step addresses the issues of the quality and the use that managers or clients apply to the intelligence delivered. Next, the four steps of the classic intelligence cycle will be detailed, raising some methods and concerns about them.

The main method in the planning and direction step is the use of the key intelligence topics. Taking advantage of the involvement of the management or the client in this step, the competitive intelligence analyst should identify the key intelligence topics adding a future decision or action and a deadline for a report delivery (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). A collection and analysis plan should also be carefully drawn regarding the classification of the information required. According to Taborda and Ferreira (2002), information can be classified by two dimensions, familiarity and frequency (Figure 2). Generic information, which can be compared to the organizational repertory, includes everyday information about clients, finances and productive processes. Opportunities include the information on laws, markets and their status. Trend analysis includes information about emerging technologies and new products. In the end of the intelligence cycle this kind of information turns into

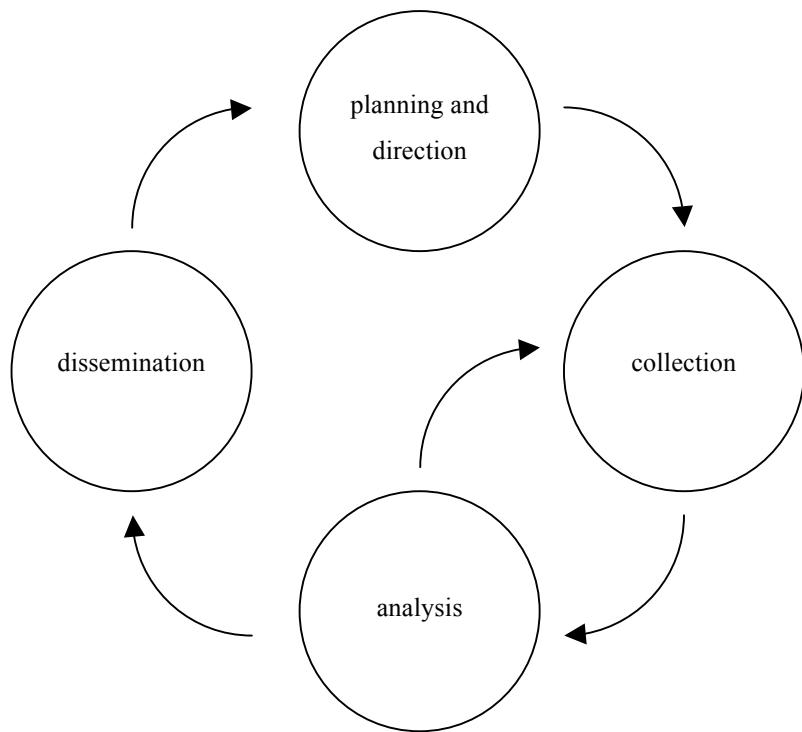


FIGURE 1 – The Intelligence Cycle (Adapted from Kahaner, 1996)

generic knowledge. Surveillance is the competitive intelligence radar. This information classified as ad-hoc and unknown will allow the organization to stay one step ahead. One last concern is to keep the intelligence customer informed (Kahaner, 1996).

While collecting information the analyst should focus on confirmed rumors, rather than unconfirmed ones, besides raw information. There are two types of information sources, primary and secondary (Kahaner, 1996; Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). Primary sources of information usually provide 90% of the information needed for the production of intelligence (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002) and they can be obtained by personal contact, asking and talking about the subject, or by observation. Secondary sources of information can be found in a published form and regularly provide a way to contact primary sources. About 80% of the primary information needed may exist inside the organization itself (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). Sources of primary information are people, legal documents and observation. Sources of secondary information are official documents about the market, organizational knowledge repertory, national and international news, governmental laws and regulations, patents

and competitive intelligence specific sources, probably as paid information. Once gathered the information must be stored. A good competitive intelligence system should provide for organized data and dissemination channels (Kahaner, 1996). Not all systems are in a digital format, but nowadays is hard to imagine one that is not and which performed the same way.

		FAMILIARITY	
		known	unknown
FREQUENCY	continuous	Generic	Trends
	ad-hoc	Opportunities	Surveillance

FIGURE 2 – Classification of the Information (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002)

In the analysis step the analyst must be concerned with the current and future markets, identifying the forces that exist in the market, and analyzing technologies, products and competitors (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). While analyzing competitors the analyst might carry out an analysis on a competitor cost structure, decision-makers personalities through interviews, conferences communications or public speeches, look at possible mergers or acquisitions by elaborating scenarios. In this last issue, when creating scenarios the analyst should always consider several types, which include the challenging, evolutionist, revolutionary, cyclic, infinity possibilities, and of course the scenario where everything remains the same (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). As Sawka (2009b) states, the scenario planning helps organizations think about their future in a structured way and is the key to ensure the strategic flexibility needed for the coming uncertain environment. In a very simple way, the analyst must first know the industry and then their players. All the analysis management tools are valid, as long as they provide the kind of analysis that the analyst is looking for. In a study conducted by the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals in 1998, the seventh most used analysis tools by the competitive intelligence professionals were the competitor profile analysis (88,9), the finance analysis (72,1), the SWOT analysis (55,2), the scenario analysis (53,8), the win/loss analysis (40,4), the war games

theories (27,5) and the simulation and modeling (25,0)¹. Often in the analysis step, the analyst finds the necessity to gather more information, which has been uncovered while analyzing the previous collected information. This can take the process one step back in order to provide a more accurate analysis and a more trusty intelligence (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002).

Far from the times when the messenger of bad news was always in imminent danger, dissemination seems like an easy task. Do not elude yourself; there are some major concerns about the way the analyst delivers the intelligence produced. Kahaner (1996) presented us with some criteria for a successful dissemination. The analyst must be responsive to the needs of management. The analyst must be focused, not general. The analysis must be timely, meaning that the last updated information should be included. There must be a high level of trust between the analyst and the management, which takes time and dedication. Results must be the best form possible for management. Long reports and recommendations are just another thing to read. They must also present directions and actions to take. Other authors present other concerns regarding the dissemination step. To know the management staff and the intelligence customer is one step beyond. A balance between every-hour report and only one report must be found. The analyst should deliver fewer reports in the beginning, on the same key intelligence topics, and more drafts and versions afterwards. Another concern is the timing. The analyst should consider that it is better to be almost right on time, than absolutely right too late. On the other hand, insufficient information to produce intelligence should originate several more probabilistic scenarios. The analyst should always leave the decision to the management (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). One last issue remains. Intelligence can often lead to a change in the organizational culture or strategy; it must not be shared with anyone else but the management. Furthermore, no manner what the decision of the management is, the analyst should accept it independently of a personal view and should not expect any kind of congratulations or similar feedback (Kahaner, 1996).

¹ The numbers in parenthesis are not percentages, but level of utilization in a 0-100 scale. A more recent study made by Fuld & Company points to the existence of more than 110 analysis tools.

The Competitive Intelligence System

Building a competitive intelligence system may seem to be a hard task, but it could be easier than expected. In some areas of the organization, people might already collect and analyze information to provide actionable reports. In this perspective, building a competitive intelligence system could be a matter of pulling it all together as a system (Kahaner, 1996). A competitive intelligence system must answer to the top management or the system user needs (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). One of the most important issues while building a competitive intelligence system is the top management support (Alden et al, 1959; Kahaner, 1996; Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). Any user less system is condemned to failure. A competitive intelligence system producing intelligence to an absent top management is a waste of time and resources, even if part of the output is delivered to other clients. During this last recession, competitive intelligence functions of several United States organizations survived due to the top management support. According to Eddleton (2010), the continuous support they receive is a consequence of the alignment of competitive intelligence efforts with the high priority strategic objectives, the use of effective analytical tools in producing value, the effective network used internally and externally, the brand of the competitive intelligence function, and the early warning process built. Achieving a relationship between the competitive intelligence function and the top management, based on trustable intelligence, is a major step in the right direction.

To help understand the issue of building a competitive intelligence system, Kahaner (1996) established a five-step process. In step one, the organization, namely the top management, should select a director for the competitive intelligence function. This director should be placed in the right location. In modern organizations with decentralized structures intelligence can flow easily and still reach top management. Thus, no matter where you place the director and the function, it should work properly inside the organization. The director is the one who coordinates the input information and the output intelligence flow around the organization. Nevertheless, the director should have open access to the top management. In step two, the director should identify who the key intelligence users are. The techniques used in the second step of the intelligence cycle are valid in this identification process. The key intelligence users are commonly the various levels of decision makers of the organization. The

third step of building a competitive intelligence system involves performing an intelligence audit of the organization. In this audit, an extensive assessment of the organizational knowledge repertory must be carried out. As discussed before, most of the information necessary in the analysis step of the intelligence cycle can be found in the organization. To identify the primary and secondary sources of information available in the organization will save time later on, when the competitive intelligence function is up and running. In the next step, a network to move information and intelligence around the organization must be designed using available technologies and communication channels. This network should be accepted by the organizational culture and the top management. Finally, in the fifth step, ethical and legal guidelines must be established for the competitive intelligence process. Competitive intelligence is still misunderstood and often confused with spying, and the guidelines might ease the concerns of the competitive intelligence issue in the minds of managers and others in the organization.

In a similar way, Taborda and Ferreira (2002) also establish a process for building a competitive intelligence system in four steps. In a first step, the intelligence needs of the managers are identified by formulating the key intelligence topics. In the second step, the existing information collection and sharing system is identified. The third step provides a simple analysis between the needs identified in the first step and the existing capacity identified in the second. The result is usually a mismatched between them, which implies that some modifications are required when specifying the system to build. These modifications could mean an improvement in the organizational intranet or workflow software, new software, a specific publication subscription, or assure an important source of information. Also in this step the competitive intelligence team is created and their jobs and responsibilities are defined. In the last step, competitive intelligence workshops are performed throughout the organization, in order to involve the entire organization in the process. Additional member teams and new sources of information are discussed, while collection and sharing tools are developed.

According to Taborda and Ferreira (2002), this is just one dimension of the competitive intelligence system building process – the process itself. Two more dimensions can be discussed – people and technology. Regarding the people dimension, a competitive intelligence system hardly works without any of three following factors: innovation and initiative oriented leadership; knowledge of the competitive intelligence methodology from the managers; absolute knowledge of the tools from the competitive intelligence team (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). Therefore, workshops, training, and top management support are critical factors to the success of the competitive intelligence system building. On the other hand, hiring senior competitive intelligence analysts or directors, might bring to the organizations some unexpected advantages: industry experience and easy access to primary sources of information. Competitive intelligence practitioners must possess specific competencies (Table 1) to perform their jobs, often described as personal traits, teachable skills, and professional experience (Fleisher, 2004). The most common roles in a competitive intelligence team are the researcher, the analyst, the manager, the human intelligence network participant, and the client or customer. There are other roles recently identified, however, their contribution to the success of the competitive intelligence function is still to be determined. These secondary roles include data builders, knowledge builders, information protectors, and system builders (Fleisher, 2004).

TABLE 1 – Competitive Intelligence Practitioners Competencies

Traits	Teachable Skills	Professional Experience
Creativity	Strategic thinking	Knowledge of corporate
Persistence	Business terminology	power structures and
Written and oral communication skills	Market research and presentation skills	decision-making process
Analytical ability	Knowledge of primary	Industry knowledge
Understanding of scientific methodology	information sources and research methods	Enhancement of primary research skills
Independent learning skills	Enhancement of	Business savvy
Business savvy	journalistic interviewing and communication skills	Journalistic interviewing and observation skills

Analytical ability
Familiarity with scientific
methodology

(Adapted from Fleisher, 2004)

The role of the researcher is to collect the necessary information according to the plan established for each key intelligence topic. The analyst spends most of the time going through the data and information in a methodological way, looking for patterns using analytical tools and producing actionable insights. The role of the manager is to plan, organize, direct, control, and is responsible for the competitive intelligence function in the organization. When the champion of the competitive intelligence function is also the manager, an additional role can be identified: the ability to influence and cultivate the competitive intelligence needs for resources next to the top management. The human intelligence network participant provides the antenna for the uncovered and unheard stories from the people of the organization. Finally, the role of the client or customer is to request intelligence every time a decision must be made.

The technology dimension is negatively correlated to the importance of the role of the human being in the competitive intelligence function. The true value of the competitive intelligence work is the analysis, and analysis is an individual process originated in individual skills, abilities and experience. Technology does not analyze; technology can help the analyst perform an efficient job. The success of the competitive intelligence system does not depend on its technological level, but on its use level (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). In sum, when deciding to build a competitive intelligence system, the organization should be concerned with the people involved, the gap between the needed and the existing technology, and the process to follow. Independently of the chosen process, and the order in which the steps are presented, the organization should always choose a team, identify the key intelligence topics and users, perform an internal intelligence audit, specify the system, and set up an ethical and legal code. After the system is up and running, organizations can start addressing some concerns about the maturity of the competitive intelligence function.

The Maturity of the Competitive Intelligence Function

The competitive intelligence process, which in its essence is a transformation of data and information into intelligence, may also have the role of changing the focus of the management from a reactive style to a proactive one (Cavalcanti, 2005). In this perspective, the competitive intelligence function can be classified by its level of maturity (Table 2). Calof (1998) states that this maturity varies from infancy to mature, according to its style being ad-hoc and reactive or using centralized tracking systems on competitors, clients and suppliers – the proactive style. According to West (2001), organizations seem to move through three stages. The competitor-awareness stage is the first, where the organization is aware of its competitors, what they do, their products, their clients and so forth. The next stage corresponds to the competitor-sensitive stage, where the organization is concerned with security, how to protect itself from competitors and practices a competitive intelligence more effectively by using strategic and tactical tools. Finally, the competitor-intelligence is reached, where the organization devotes serious resources studying their competitors and anticipating their actions. Similarly, Heppes and du Toit (2009) have presented a three stage typical evolution of a world-class competitive intelligence function. The early stage competitive intelligence provides facts while creating competitive intelligence awareness in the organization. The mid-level capability includes identifying trends and implications from gathered information. The final stage is the world-class capability, where competitive intelligence is regarded as a key component of the organizational strategy.

TABLE 2 – Classification of the Maturity of the Competitive Intelligence Function

	Focus	Level of Maturity		
Calof (1998)	ad-hoc vs. continuous	infancy	–	mature
West (2001)	competitors	competitor- awareness	competitor- sensitive	competitor- intelligence

Cavalcanti (2005)	management style	reactive-style	-	proactive-style
Heppes & du Toit (2009)	strategy	early stage	mid-level capability	world-class capability

Competitive intelligence can be split in two separate types of work, the continuous work and the ad-hoc fulfillment of the requests of the top management (Taborda & Ferreira, 2002). In this approach it is expected that a recent competitive intelligence function would spend most of the time working on ad-hoc requests. Through time, this tendency is expected to change and, in a utopian organization, the competitive intelligence function would dedicate all the time to the continuous work. All possible requests have been somehow already analyzed, and the fulfillment is immediate. The level of the maturity of this competitive intelligence capacity is the highest. One can classify this maturity as proactive (Calof, 1998; Cavalcanti, 2005), as the competitor-intelligence style (West, 2001) or as being achieved the world-class competitive intelligence stage (Heppes & du Toit, 2009). The focus of continuous work, at this level of maturity, is the organization itself and the organizational environment. This analysis should cover from the suppliers of your suppliers to the customers of your clients, including all which can influence your market and future ones.

Conclusion

When addressing the maturity of the competitive intelligence function one should identify the existence of such function. In order to do that, one must acknowledge the presence of an operational competitive intelligence system. To consider if a system is operational one can identify its users, inputs, processes, and outputs. In the case of a competitive intelligence system the users should be any manager or any decision-maker in the organization. However, due to the resources and the amount of time and money involved, the support of the top management is essential to its survival. A competitive intelligence system should use primary and secondary sources of information as inputs supplies, and produce and deliver intelligence to its customers. The processes used by the competitive intelligence system should be easily identified

as part of the intelligence cycle, along with an ethical and legal code, particularly in the collection step of the cycle. Identification of key intelligence topics, information research and collection methods, analytical tools, and channels of intelligence dissemination must exist in order to recognize the presence of a competitive intelligence process in the system. Only then, after identifying the existence of all of these issues, can one state being in the presence of a competitive intelligence function and discuss its maturity.

The different classifications of the maturity of the competitive intelligence function discussed does not provide with a single scale, which could allow comparing different organizations. When approaching the maturity of one or more competitive intelligence functions, with the purpose of a comparison study, one should use the same classification or the same classifications to compare the maturity of the functions. Because of their different focuses, one cannot compare different maturities of the competitive intelligence functions using different classifications or scales. An infancy competitive intelligence function, which spends most of the time producing intelligence for ad-hoc requests, could be supporting decision-makers to a proactive-style management. The question is: was it the competitive intelligence function that drove the management style from reactive to proactive? Or was it the proactive-style of the management the reason for the existence of the competitive intelligence function? Or even, was it the proactive-style of the management that kept the competitive intelligence function in the infancy stage, by flooding it with requests and not providing more resources? Therefore, when comparing maturities of different competitive intelligence functions, one should be careful which scales to use. The best method is to use them all. This way one can state more certainly that a mature, competitor-intelligence, proactive-style, world-class capability competitive intelligence function has a higher level of maturity than a mature, competitor-intelligence, proactive-style, mid-level capability function. At least at a strategy focus level, being equals on the other ones. Nevertheless, more research is needed in these matters. The main goal of achieving a high-level of maturity of the competitive intelligence function should be established and consensus must be reached among the academic community. Wherever that goal focuses on the duality of ad-hoc or continuous requests, competitors, role of changing the management style, or competitive intelligence as a component of organizational strategy, the concept of the

maturity of the competitive intelligence function must be identical to all. Recalling the definition of maturity as being a very advanced or developed form or state, one can declare that this issue could be solved by answering the following question: what is a very advanced or developed form or state of a competitive intelligence function?

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