Competitive Intelligence Education: Competencies, Sources, and Trends

Nearly all organizations are increasingly using competitive intelligence (CI) in their business marketing, planning, and strategizing; however, formal educational offerings in CI are seriously lacking.

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Acquiring an education is easier to do in some fields of study than others. “Name-brand” professionals such as accountants, engineers, lawyers, or nurses not only have to complete an agreed-upon curriculum of at least four years of higher education, but also have continuing education requirements that help ensure that they remain abreast of the latest developments in their fields. However, the educational opportunities for practitioners in relatively young knowledge-based management fields is not as easily defined.

Where does the erstwhile corporate librarian, competitive analyst, knowledge manager, strategic planning director, or competitive intelligence (CI) manager go to acquire and enhance his or her capabilities? What knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience should be sought? Does an advanced certificate or degree in the field make any difference in their career possibilities or pathways? How vital is it to stay on top of developments, and is continuing education a necessity to stay ahead of one’s business or marketplace competitors?

Why Competitive Intelligence?

In its implicit form, CI is performed every time any individual in the organization attempts to position to current or potential customers the organization’s products/services in the marketplace relative to competitive offerings. Positioning is a critical element of the CI process in that companies are trying to establish their offerings as providing higher value to customers than competing products/services.

Similar to many newer disciplinary fields where coalescence around the domain and scope has not occurred, numerous definitions of CI as both a process and a product exist. In general, CI 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 CI products is commonly known as the intelligence cycle and progresses through a recurring set of steps including planning, data gathering, analysis, and dissemination.

CI is an activity that nearly all organizations, public or private, large or small, global or local, perform either...
explicitly or implicitly. In its explicit form, organizations systematically and deliberately organize themselves, empowering and assigning individuals to develop insights about their competitors and competitive environment in order to better position themselves in their marketplaces. Many companies have formal CI functions and processes, and some companies, including Boeing, Merck, Motorola, and Procter & Gamble, are well-known for their CI capabilities. Industries such as high-technology electronics, fast-moving consumer goods, integrated energy, and pharmaceuticals also contain higher-than-average levels of CI activity.

CI has grown in prominence since the early 1980s as the managerial focus on information and knowledge-based competition has increased. Organizations are increasingly seeking to better understand how they can leverage their value propositions in the marketplace. They realize that they need to exploit and tap into the wealth of data and informational resources that exist both within and outside their organizational domain. CI experts generally suggest that the majority of insights a company needs in order to compete more effectively can be captured from readily accessible information resources within the organization's scope – whether these are owned or outsourced, the organization has to develop the effective means and channels by which to capture, assess, and use them.

The process of CI has always been an inherent part of the business marketing, planning, and strategy landscape; nevertheless, formal educational offerings in CI only have about a three-decade, mostly sporadic, history.

Status of CI Education
Although there has been a natural, healthy evolution in the nature of offerings available, not all CI educational developments have been positive. Key factors that have kept the number of CI educational offerings from mushrooming as some observers had predicted, include:

Introduction to CI

The following represents sample content of a 14-week, graduate-level “Introduction to Competitive Intelligence” course:

1. **What is competitive intelligence (CI)?** – definitions, evolution, and relation to other fields (particularly strategy), intelligence cycle, CI roles, career paths, CI, and the top management team
2. **Data gathering from primary sources** – methods and sources: employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, trade association officials, academics, reporters, etc.
3. **Data gathering from secondary sources** – World Wide Web, online and subscriber databases, company-published materials, newspapers, trade journals, and public records
4. **Analysis process** – planning for analysis, biases in analysis, understanding the intelligence client, working with data gatherers, information systems for analysis, traits and characteristics of the successful analyst
5. **Analysis methods** – industry, strategy, competitor, customer, environment, technology, financial resources, and temporal (i.e., time-based) models of analysis
6. **Ethics and ethical issues in CI** – codes of conduct, ethical decision-making models, values and ethics, ethics case studies, legal issues and regulations (e.g., the U.S. Economic Espionage Act), and best practices
7. **Information systems for CI** – intranets, managing records, information and knowledge, software applications, hardware considerations, communities of practice, continuity, and contingencies, and technology and CI.
8. **Communication in CI** – methods, processes, channels, sender/receiver models, reducing noise, packaging the portfolio of CI products
9. **Assessment, evaluation, and measurement of CI performance** – methods of assessment, processes for evaluation, planning and control of performance, evolution of the CI unit over time
10. **Administration and management of the CI operation** – budgeting, directing/leading, evaluation and control, managing the core CI work processes, organizing, planning, project management, role/mission, staffing, and structuring/locating
11. **Counter-intelligence** – definitions, vulnerabilities, processes for protecting information and knowledge, establishing perimeters
12. **Global issues in competitive intelligence** – country-specific CI practices, culture and CI, processes for gathering international intelligence, practical considerations in performing global CI, case studies in global CI
13. **Industry-specific CI** – examples and practices from pharmaceuticals, fast-moving retail goods, banking, manufacturing, and services
14. **CI in the real world** – panel of speakers and guest presenters
1. Few course/program offerings – There remains a general dearth of CI offerings at the post-secondary level. The area is not established in major colleges or faculties. Few business or management schools have CI courses, and CI is mostly absent among the top business schools. Only a handful of places around the globe even have the capability to offer a doctorate degree in the field and new CI scholars are produced only occasionally.

2. Scarcity of research – The field lacks an agreed-upon body of knowledge, core texts, and case studies – the needed published record that helps professionalize a field. CI is served by few major journals, has virtually no chaired professorships, and there are only a handful of research centers and programs dedicated to its study.

3. Scope ambiguity – Ongoing struggles have occurred within a few universities about where to put CI – in business, management, library and information sciences, information systems, journalism, military studies? Even within a business or management program, there are questions as to whether CI belongs in marketing, management information systems, or business policy/strategy. Others question whether CI is even a legitimate discipline, practice, profession, field, or area of study.

4. Economic trends – CI appeared to be taking off in the 1990s, as represented by a major growth in membership of the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP), but then it waned. Past studies have demonstrated declines in the area during recessionary periods when organizations reduce staff numbers of what they deem less-essential functions.

Despite these difficulties encountered by CI in gaining acceptance within the university context, there have been some positive developments in CI education, particularly in the offerings developed by non-post-secondary institutions, consultants, and individual authors.

**The Successful CI Practitioner**

Although there is an unresolved debate about whether effective CI practitioners are born or made, it is important to understand the nature of those individuals being educated and the type of knowledge, skills, and abilities they are supposed to demonstrate. Not all those studying CI perform the same activities or are expected to demonstrate a universal competencies set. Indeed, as in many fields, CI practitioners often specialize in a handful of functions that are predominant in organizational practice.

Practitioners must possess specific competencies or knowledge, skills, and abilities to effectively execute the intelligence cycle. Knowledge, skills, and abilities are acquired from the interaction of 1) traits, 2) coursework, and 3) professional experience and observation (i.e., mentoring). The following competencies list was adapted from a group derived by CI educator Jerry Miller of Simmons College:

1. **Traits** – creativity, persistence, written and oral communication skills, analytical ability, understanding of scientific methodology, independent learning skills, and business savvy

2. **Cognitive domains/Teachable skills** – strategic thinking, business terminology, market research and presentation skills, knowledge of primary information sources and research methods; enhancement of journalistic interviewing and communication skills, analytical ability, and a familiarity with scientific methodology

3. **Professional experience** – knowledge of corporate power structures and decision-making processes, industry knowledge; enhancement of primary research skills, business savvy, and journalistic interviewing and observational skills

Different competencies also are required for various CI roles. The most common primary roles in CI are:

1. **Researcher** – using both primary and secondary sources, this individual is charged with gathering needed information to support the resolution of decisionmakers’ critical intelligence needs. Researchers benefit from a large, established, readily available body of educational offerings.

2. **Analyst** – acts as an internal consultant by methodically sifting through the data and information collected by researchers in order to define reality and generate actionable insights for decision-making executives. Analysts can partake in a growing yet still inadequate body of educational offerings.

3. **Manager** – plans, organizes, directs, controls, and has responsibility for the organization’s CI effort. The manager may also be the CI “champion,” an individual who has the ability to influence the top management
4. **Human intelligence network participant** – the individual entrusted with serving the organization as an “antenna,” sharing with others what they uncover and hear while carrying out their everyday responsibilities.

5. **Client/Customer** – the decision-maker who requires intelligence in order to make an effective decision; virtually no educational opportunities are available for these individuals.

A number of secondary CI roles have also been recently identified. These include data builders, knowledge builders, protectors (i.e., individuals entrusted with protecting the organization from the predatory efforts of others who would seek to capitalize on informational vulnerabilities), and system builders. As most of these functions do not ordinarily emanate from CI roles and responsibilities, the competencies set these individuals must have to be successful in CI remains undetermined.
Sources of CI Education

There are essentially two forms of CI education available: formal and self-directed. Formal education can be acquired through the post-secondary offerings of universities, colleges, and community colleges, and results in a degree, diploma, or certificate. Self-directed education offerings are more plentiful and require individuals to plan their own educational content and sequence.

Formal CI educational offerings include:

1. **Ph.D.** (e.g., Lund University, Sweden) – These are rare.
2. **Master's or bachelor's degrees** (e.g., Mercynhurst College; University of Aix-Marseille, France; University of Stockholm, Sweden) – The number of these programs appears to be slowly growing, particularly outside North America.
3. **Certificates/diplomas** (e.g., Drexel University; American Military University; Simmons College) – This has been the fastest-growing segment of the CI higher-education market and will likely remain that way in the near future.

Because these studies are not guided by an agreed-upon body of knowledge or regulated by a professional association or governmental body, the content and delivery modes in these post-secondary institutions vary more than would be found in more established fields or professions. [See “Introduction to CI” on page 57.]

Of course, individuals who want to learn more about CI can look to a variety of sources outside of academia. Self-directed CI learning opportunities include:

1. **Books** – Arguably the most common form of CI education, there has been much growth in the number of CI books published in recent years. [See “20 Key Books for Self-Learners in Competitive Intelligence” on page 60.]
2. **CI-specific publications** – Examples include serials such as CI Magazine and Journal of Competitive Intelligence and Management published by SCIP, but are not plentiful or expected to increase in quantity.
3. **Workshops and meetings** – Offered by various not-for-profit associations (i.e., SCIP) and for-profit conference and educational providers (e.g., Academy of Competitive Intelligence, Competia, Frost & Sullivan, International Institute for Research), these have been readily available and are expected to remain that way.
4. **On-the-job/mentoring** – Many organizations that have well-established and dedicated CI functions offer on-the-job development oversight for new CI hires. Successful knowledge-based companies proactively provide on-the-job training and development and mentoring opportunities.

Trends in CI Education

There are several key trends discernible in the various CI education channels. Among the most important are:

1. **Integration with other disciplines and areas** – It is more common to find CI skills, knowledge, and abilities integrated and mixed with other study areas than it is to find pure, stand-alone CI educational offerings. As such, CI practitioners can benefit from course offerings in areas including information systems, journalism processes, knowledge management, library and information sciences, records and information management, and business policy/strategy. The portability of this knowledge, skills, and abilities to CI roles, and of CI knowledge, skills, and abilities back to roles in these fields, is generally high.
2. **Horizontal education** – CI practitioners employ common processes such as those associated with the intelligence cycle. Although these processes can consist of proportional mixes of “art” and “science,” there are some who strongly believe that these processes can be taught and learned. Some managers believe it is easier to train knowledgeable industry participants about CI than to educate CI practitioners about an industry.
3. **Globalized content** – CI is increasingly performed in global environments and addresses global competition and competitors. As such, new educational contributions in CI are progressively emerging from sources outside North America, and North American offerings are becoming more internationally focused. For example, universities in the United Kingdom (DeMontfort in Leicester), Australia (Bond in the Gold Coast), South Africa (Pretoria Technikon), Finland (Helsinki School of Economics), and Japan (Nihon Graduate School of Business) offer a variety of CI courses and programs. Furthermore, CI educators in North American universities have more international content in their CI courses than they had five years ago.
4. **Technology emphasis** – CI education now addresses technology both in terms of content and process. CI courses can now be taken through:
   - distance or correspondence formats, such as the classes offered by the American Military University
   - real-time, Internet-based courses like the ones taught by Conor Vibert at Acadia University in Nova Scotia
   - Blackboard, WebCT, and other Internet-based platforms used by most large-sized university instructors
   - self-contained and scheduled CDs like the Iron Horse Media/Fuld War Room product
likely grow slowly but steadily into the future. Prospective and current CI practitioners will have many opportunities to acquire and learn needed CI competencies, although these may not necessarily emanate from post-secondary institutions. Through astute combinations of formal and self-directed learning opportunities, CI practitioners can readily acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to be effective in an increasingly knowledge-based environment.

5. Active tone – There is a growing awareness that CI is learned through actively listening, reading, discussing, and performing. The first three typically had been emphasized through the early days of CI education in the 1980s and 1990s, but actively “doing” CI has grown. Most CI educational offerings require learners to participate in assignments and projects that put their new understandings into practice. Students can rarely pass contemporary courses without having demonstrated competence in, for example, a data-acquisition assignment such as querying a supplier about developments in their field, formulating recommendations about a competitor’s next development offerings, or designing the architecture of a CI information system.

Salary studies by SCIP and others have demonstrated that advanced degrees are worth correspondingly more in terms of a CI practitioner’s compensation. What is not known is whether an advanced degree is a necessity to serve in certain CI capacities or whether individuals already in the profession have greater tendencies to seek additional education. For those practitioners who recognize that they require continuing education, they must make a choice as to the appropriate nature and content of their studies.

This dilemma points to the ongoing difficulty of a field that lacks agreement about a common body of knowledge and has no overseers in the form of professional bodies or governmental agencies to lead and regulate it.

Future of CI Education

The demand and need for effective CI practitioners have remained stable and strong through several decades and economic cycles. Educational offerings to meet this demand will likely grow slowly but steadily into the future. Prospective and current CI practitioners will have many opportunities to acquire and learn needed CI competencies, although these may not necessarily emanate from post-secondary institutions. Through astute combinations of formal and self-directed learning opportunities, CI practitioners can readily acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to be effective in an increasingly knowledge-based environment.

References


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