

HOW CAN I EMBRACE IT TO DELIVER UNIQUE INTELLIGENCE?

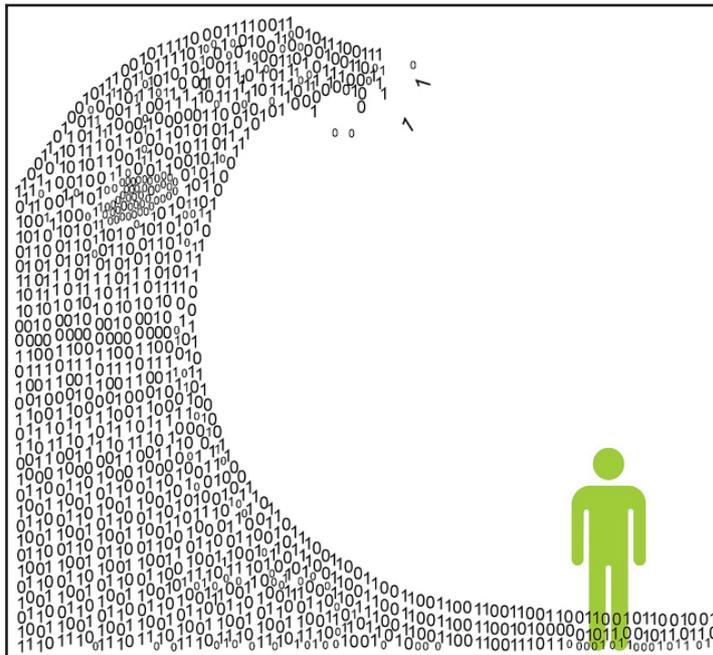
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One of the most popular networking events to date has been the Forum's 'Speed Dating: The Great Software Debate in CI' with a passionate group of Software Vendors (Fuld and Company 2012). With the sheer abundance of information growing through social media, there is an assumption that if IT can collect all the data for me, I have the intelligence! What better opportunity then for Dr. Sheila Wright to advance the discussion and share her experience with the great and the good gathered to hear how she and her De Montfort University (DMU) students embraced IT to deliver action-oriented competitor profiles using the Digimind platform, just one of a number of offerings that are available on the market. The overriding message from Sheila's experiences was that it is vital to think about what you are trying to achieve, where the value will come from, and work with a platform that can mold itself to your needs.

A LOT OF THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU JUMP INTO THE IT WATER!

Sheila certainly got the audience to stand back before jumping straight into the IT water by asking the assembled



audience to think about a number of factors. Other than the 30,000 ft. view more broadly shared with good colleagues from Fuld & Company about the role IT could play within your CI process (See Figure 1), Sheila focused on a key deliverable at hand, namely the Competitor Profile.

One of the messages Sheila provided was that data collection is the starting point, not the end point, and that the

focus needs to be on streamlining the collection into an analytical deliverable. This is what the practitioner should always be thinking about, rather than the more simple exercise of synthesising information. Through her unique focus on the competitor profile structure, she also argued for less data, but more interpretation. It was quite a lot to take in and arguably, fairly impossible from a 30,000 ft. view. Some attendees probably thought that they were going to enjoy a demonstration of the tool. Instead, they learned how Sheila and her students managed to manipulate the tool exhaustively to craft their competitor profiles. The message was clear: "get the profile to focus on what needs to be known rather than what is nice to know, identify the knowledge gaps, and focus your efforts on attempting to fill them."

FIGURE 1: ISSUES TO CONSIDER WITH TECHNOLOGY INCORPORATION

Some issues to consider	Stages to roll-out
Who are the customers? When is the correct time to consider a software solution in your organizational context? What skill sets exist in the organization to support/use/ implement the software? Who is responsible for intelligence technology? Whose budget does it come from? Is it an off the shelf solution or customized? Is it people and process before technology?	Needs assessment up to 4 weeks Software selection 4-6 weeks Pilot 8 to 20 weeks Commercial roll-out 16-26 weeks

Source: Fuld & Company

Lesson #1: Types of Competitors with Competitor Profiles

Part of Sheila’s approach to focusing on the competitors was to think of the competitors through four mood lenses. Is the competitor you are profiling a ‘sleeper,’ one that thinks they have loyal customers, slow in reading the market, and who doesn’t want to compete? Examples could include BlackBerry, Blockbuster, or the UK’s specialist retailer of entertainment media, HMV. Is the competitor a ‘selector,’ one that responds only to threatening action; a ‘warrior,’ one that responds to every competitive move, or finally an ‘erratic,’ unpredictable with no past pattern of competitive response? This helps the practitioner capture the overall position and mood of the competitor before jumping into the detail.

Lesson #2: Focus on ‘Relevant/Value-Added’, not ‘More and Accurate’

Previous research undertaken by the UK Competitive Intelligence Forum (Fuld & Company 2012) had identified competitor profiles as the most undertaken analysis by practitioners. Sheila provoked her audience to think not about more and accurate information, but about that which is deemed to be relevant to deliver added-value CI. To move from ‘more and accurate to ‘relevant and added value,’ the analyst has to think about that company’s critical success factors which are essential elements to get right, in order for the firm to be successful in its chosen market. By focusing on the company’s critical success factors, it helps the analyst focus on the ‘what if’ rather than the ‘so what’ and this helps to identify the knowledge gaps which surround each competitor.

Lesson #3: Flexibility in Designing the Templates, One Size Does Not Fit All

Sheila claimed that each company will look at the same competitor differently relative to their own assumptions, where that company adds value through its differentiation and where indeed the observing company feels that the target company is ahead or behind. To that end, no one exact template exists to deliver competitor profiles. However, Sheila reported that there are a number of common areas to look at, but dependent on industry sector and type of company, there will inevitably be a large number of variables which are specific and unique to the firm. Any good software platform should be able to accomplish this, indeed Digimind was fully able and willing to devise a custom template for use by De Montfort University students. Sheila designed this with the aim of covering most industry sectors. Obviously, it had to be restricted to the areas in which Sheila could realistically expect the students to carry out secondary research. She pointed out that it would be entirely unreasonable to expect a student carrying out research on firms in the pharmaceutical sector to identify, interpret, or intellectually comment upon the level or focus of research and development costs, despite that being a key CSF for that industry. Likewise, the frequently close-guarded numbers related to cost of production figures in the commodity sectors of oil, gas, wheat, sugar, salt, cement, etc. You would expect these to be included in an in-house system simply because they are such important aspects of the business.

Digimind was able to enhance its standard profile template to meet Sheila’s needs and, as can be seen from Figure 2, the increased content that she asked to be included, represented a fairly extensive overhaul. Both parties benefitted from this joint effort, Sheila and her students in learning how to add and delete fields and Digimind which was then able to appreciate the breadth of detail that a practitioner might need as a generic product. Thus, it was possible to identify the gaps which were present in their existing template. The task was then to research each element, obtain the required information, record sources, translate that information into intelligence via interpretation, and deliver unique commentary.

What Sheila did make clear was that the competitor profile needs to be a platform for the firm to consider where the competitor may adversely affect you, where competitors may spot a weakness, where there is potential for significant improvement, align these with the critical success factors, and as such are given priority in the competitor profiling effort. The purpose, of course, being to identify which of these elements can be quietly improved without alerting competitors to your objectives and designing a reaction stance in advance.

A number of frameworks and analytical tools developed by Sheila were presented, the first of which identified the critical success factors and, in turn, were individually weighted to total 1.00. Then the competitor was scored against the host company, so it was relative, on a scale of 1-4, where 1 was poor and 4 was superior. When totalled, this gives a relative competitive strength of

one company against another based on a total score, the higher the score, the stronger the company. This was then the basis for completion of a Competitor Profile Response Matrix Commentary that delivered recommendations on where and how the gaps could be closed. It ensures that value-added intelligence is created with IT assistance in assembling the data and the analyst considered corrective recommendations.

Lesson #4: IT is Required Because...

So it is a no brainer that IT is required given that, as professionals, we are in information overload and need structure, and focus. We are forced to focus on ‘need to know’ and not ‘like to know.’ Profiling makes sure we are brief, yet a hundred times more useful. IT assists in transforming information into understanding and it makes it much easier to ensure that the CI effort is driven by events and not calendars. A dedicated IT tool facilitates far greater alignment of signals unearthed through the more accurate validity of events than could ever be achieved by erratic and haphazard searching. With a search engine only focus, it is challenging to verify the information, therefore, the analyst might pursue the wrong leads with unverified information relative to his or her profile at hand. The Digimind platform addresses these issues by allowing the analyst to design their profile, concentrating on the ‘need to know’ and make recommendations based on verified and validated data. Some of the platform’s features are highlighted in Figure 3.

FIGURE 2: THE ABILITY OF IT TO DELIVER UNIQUE COMPETITOR PROFILES

Main Competitor Profile Headings	Number of Elements Within Each Category
Company Information	7
Financial Information	12
Strategy	14
Human Resources	12
Market Analysis	14
Sales	4
Operations	7
Customer Service	4
Products & Services	12
Marketing	13

Source: Sheila Wright

FIGURE 3: DIGIMIND’S FEATURES FOR COMPETITOR PROFILING

Competitor Profiling Needs	Digimind Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility in designing template • Focus on analytics • Less time spent on collection • Ad-hoc scoring facilities • “What If” analysis • Segmenting competitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to setup custom fields • Visual display of data within profiles • Benchmarking features • Automatic dynamic content for specific fields (i.e. financial results, board members) • Custom numeric fields • Custom SWOT, Bain matrix, etc. features. • Classification features for typologies

Source: Digimind

SO WHAT FOR THE AUDIENCE?

Attendees left this networking meeting with some fresh tips to apply at work, given the deep understanding of not only Sheila’s experiences but those of her students. Sheila generously shared a deliverable from one of her students that showed how the Digimind platform had been used to create unique value through intelligence. Audience take-aways included:

- Think about the analysis ahead of engaging with IT.
- Take a realistic view of how to prioritize the plethora of readily available secondary data sources.
- Segmenting behaviors of competitors – ‘sleepers,’ ‘selectors,’ ‘warriors,’ and ‘erratics.’
- Understand competitor profile designs and critical success factors.
- Practical example of extracting the value from a tool such as Digimind.
- Witnessing the potential for competitor profiles to form the basis for the consideration of competitive response strategies.

Sheila publicly thanked and acknowledged the generous support of M. Patrice Francois, co-founder of Digimind who offered the use of its platform to DMU and for setting up a dedicated space on the system for the students to do their work. The Digimind technical staff willingly and speedily engaged in the creation of the DMU company profile while both Daniel Spilsbury and Cate

Farrell gave of their time to provide on-site training for the group. Without their support, none of this could have happened.

NETWORKING EVENT SERIES

The SCIP recognized UK International Affiliate, the UK Competitive Intelligence Forum (UK CIF), hosts a series of networking events. These events bring together practitioners from all corners of the discipline: service providers, consultants, academics, and practitioners.

The series aims to increase the understanding and awareness of desired themes and take the discipline to different business practices through co-hosting opportunities with other professional organizations and membership bodies, as well as with SCIP’s UK-based members. It is about creating an environment to discover, enhance, exchange, and problem solve. Previous networking event discussion themes and presentations can be downloaded from the website after registering at the site by setting up a username and password.

The UK Competitive Intelligence Forum is grateful to all speakers, passionate characters like Sheila, without whom there would be neither a networking event, nor the creation of a rich exchange of ideas and learnings. The opportunity to speak at these networking events is open to anyone, United Kingdom-based or just passing through, subject to meeting the growing list of event topics. Engagement with attendees is around five themes, centered on case studies: innovative integration of CI within the

business, professional growth in CI, analysis in action, managing information overload, and communicating with impact.

We encourage others to come forward to introduce the group to new perspectives, experiences, and learning. What links all the prospective speakers and panellists, irrespective of their background or role within the competitive intelligence profession, is a passion for the discipline. Along with all the volunteer speakers to date and those that have yet to take advantage of the opportunity, they are all unique examples of characters continuing to fix the discipline more firmly on the map! What is the next step? Register your interest and details with info@ukcif.co.uk to explore speaking opportunities and/or to be proactively kept abreast of forthcoming events in the UK.

REFERENCES

www.ukcif.co.uk, 2012. 'Speed Dating with the Software Vendors; the Great Software Debate in CI' was the result of a panel debate facilitated by Fuld & Company to explore a range of issues regarding the pitfalls and trends of implementing IT technology into the CI process

<http://www.ukcif.co.uk/managing-information-overload/speed-dating-with-the-software-vendors-panel-debate-facilitated-by-fuld-company>

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<http://www.ukcif.co.uk/ci-professional-growth/taking-the-pulse-of-the-ci-discipline-2012-how-have-we-evolved-and-whats-next>

Dr. Sheila Wright is Director of Strategic Partnerships Ltd. Since its inception in 1989, executive education, competitive intelligence, competitive analysis, and business development projects have been undertaken in UK, USA, Germany, Italy, France, South Africa, Spain and UAE. Sheila has managed projects for the World Bank, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, Food & Agriculture Organization, and UK Government Ministries. Sheila's interests lie in securing improved competitive performance and decision-making in firms, an area in which her publications have been widely cited. She has achieved an MBA from the University of Warwick, and a PhD in Competitive Intelligence & Insight Management. Sheila was responsible for introducing the Digimind platform to her teaching at De Montfort University that resulted in a seismic shift in attitude and competence among those exposed to it. Sheila can be reached on sheila.stratpartners@aol.com

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