

A WIKI COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM

DAPHNE R. RABAN, Ph.D., *University of Haifa*



Competitive intelligence is the art of balancing between open source and human source information, as well as between the advice of experts and the knowledge dispersed among many corporate employees and business partners. Conventional wisdom says that the information signal-to-noise ratio improves by carefully selecting sources. However, this approach can fail for a weak signal that later becomes important. A signal may be weak when it does not appear in your prime information sources or you do not have a way to pool weak signals and turn them into meaningful intelligence. Enter the collaborative intelligence process.

Web 2.0 software and websites open up new ways to pool weak signals through the collaborative efforts of many people regardless of their prior acquaintance, affiliation, or location. The technology is ubiquitous and easy-to-use, but you need to consider these questions:

- What intelligence questions or issues can be answered best by collaborative intelligence?
- Which tools should you apply to each type of issue or question?
- Can these tools provide answers for both national and international interests and activities?
- How do we motivate people to participate in such efforts?

WHY SHOULD COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE INTEREST CI MANAGERS?

One of the obstacles to producing good competitive analysis is managerial

blind spots that typically affect those working in hierarchies and long-time employees. Collaborative intelligence builds on decentralized knowledge, creating a balance shift from the individual expert to a larger number of knowledgeable people. Collaborative input to intelligence analysis can reduce some common blind spots and amplify weak information signals.

Collaborative intelligence networks cross internal organizational boundaries and bring together experts who share common knowledge but do not belong to the same organizational units. They

This article starts by explaining why collaborative intelligence efforts are of interest to all CI stakeholders, managers, academics, and practitioners. Then the article describes a unique wiki-based collaborative project implemented in the University of Haifa, Graduate School of Management.

are a relatively easy, fast and effective way of building a knowledge-based community as part of an organization-wide plan to manage knowledge.

Collaborative networks reduce the reliance on specific “indispensable” individuals by pooling knowledge from fairly small contributions by many participants and documenting that knowledge. A small effort by many company personnel can generate unique sources of information which may not exist outside the organization. The cost

or effort of participation is low and the benefit is high to the individual and to the organization.

A collaborative intelligence system proves a platform where employees who are not well known in their organisation can convey their expertise and obtain respect for their knowledge. Collaborative intelligence is empowering!

A collaborative intelligence system can also open the organization to external sources of knowledge and innovation from activities such as joint projects for companies and their suppliers, customers, consultants or other relevant actors. Microsoft uses a collaborative platform for customer support where customers help other customers sort out their questions regarding Microsoft applications.

WHY SHOULD COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE INTEREST ACADEMICS?

Collaborative intelligence systems and the activities they enable make academic teaching more engaging and interactive. They also offer opportunities to custom-design learning materials.

Collaborative intelligence encourages student curiosity by actively engaging them and transforming classes into learning communities. Collaboration brings together lecturers, researchers, and students from different institutions. Collaborative systems document the scientific discovery process which aids both in making project progress as well as in summarizing and reporting the findings.

Collaborative intelligence systems create a new dimension for student assignments on an online network where you can measure the results. It also provides fertile ground for academic research on collaboration, learning, and social phenomena in these projects.

WHY SHOULD COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE INTEREST CI PRACTITIONERS?

Collaborative intelligence processes synergistically pool practitioners' knowledge at the organization's national and international levels, providing another way to help form a highly functioning community. Often competitive intelligence practitioners can become quite lonely when they are soloists in organizations or in consulting firms. In these situations, forming a community provides professional support by a network of experts.

Local collaborative intelligence projects deliver higher value-added information that is not found in standard sources intended for broader audiences. Many national projects increase communication between the business and academic communities and enhance the development of a global competitive intelligence community. This, in turn, contributes to the strength and image of the profession. (Note that SCIP can take an active role in designing and supporting these local and international efforts.)

A CASE IN POINT: A COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE PROJECT IN ACADEMIA

The project described here was about competitive intelligence as a learning subject. It provides an example of how a collaborative activity can be accomplished, and a template to establish your own collaborative intelligence effort.

Since 2000 I have taught a course entitled "Online Competitive Intelligence" as part of the MBA

program at the School of Management, University of Haifa. The course explains the CI process with special focus on collection and analysis of information. This course includes a website and an e-learning system. The website contains links to databases and other valuable sources of business information. The e-learning system consists of class presentations, assignments, readings and discussion groups.

As the course instructor, I supplied all information for both online environments.

The job of updating it became harder every year as the number of sources increased and a rise in Internet business dynamics had sources disappearing and reincarnating in other locations. In this 'broadcast' mode, the students' involvement was limited to participating in discussions.

Another difficulty was the absence of a good academic textbook on competitive intelligence (online or not) in Hebrew. While our students are proficient in English, I preferred to use a textbook in our native language with local examples. In addition, one of the three classes that I taught included students who were managers in non-profit organizations. This group has some specific needs in the field of competitive intelligence that are rarely, if ever, met in conventional CI books which are written for the business sector.

As the course instructor, I could embark on the daunting task of writing a textbook which would address the business as well as the non-profit sector. There had to be a more practical and faster solution! Recalling the book "The Wisdom of Crowds" by James Surowiecki, the solution seemed simple: Harness the knowledge and ability of MBA students to write a textbook in a collaborative effort.

The project goals were to:

1. Teach the students in an Executive MBA program how to collaborate in an open environment.

2. Shift the focus of competition from grades to content because of the transparency of the whole process and its outcomes.
3. Produce a unique information source in a minimal amount of time, creating a living textbook not available anywhere else.
4. Combine global knowledge about intelligence with local stories and needs.

Our students, mostly mid-career managers, understood the potential of collaboration through participating in the project -- the classic 'learning by doing'. Within three months 130 students have built a rich and unique textbook which covers most aspects of competitive intelligence. (It is available to anyone who can read Hebrew <http://ci.haifa.ac.il>.)

A wiki platform held the student-generated content for long-term use. The University's computer support personnel constructed a MediaWiki platform within a day. After writing a brief homepage describing the project, I created an elaborate table of contents and students were invited to add topics to it. The student assignment specified writing according to acceptable academic standards.

Each pair of my 130 students wrote a complete topic from scratch. In addition, individual students reviewed two sections written by others and edited them. Improvements could be anything from semantic or grammar corrections to the introduction of new content and additional references.

Now, after another class (90 MBA students, total students: 220) has edited the book, it contains 94 unique chapters and sections, it has received no less than 8,153 edits, the various pages were viewed 66,526 times. This means that, on average, each student entered about 37 edits.

The educational outcome was excellent: not only did the students do original, high-quality work, they also had access to all other chapters written by their peers. In our collaborative

project students could actually broaden their knowledge far beyond the specific chapter they wrote and beyond what classroom lectures can convey.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

At this point you may be asking: 'How good can student papers be?' Our MBA students are all experienced mid- and upper-level managers. They are highly motivated to succeed and their contributions are of very high quality. On the whole, the papers in our case chapters are very good. The book is by no means finished, and that's part of its beauty -- it will never be finished. There will always be improvements, expansions and updates; unlike 'stale' textbooks, this is a living project.

Moreover, the writing process demanded that the students apply some of the practices required by competitive intelligence work: analyse information needs, identify sources of information, run searches, evaluate the information obtained, synthesise it into a coherent report, and provide pertinent examples. The assignment expresses the students' ability as independent learners, their critical thinking, and it even gives them the satisfaction of doing original work.

Some impediments to the successful application of this project include those that can appear in competitive intelligence activities.

Technophobia

Some people did not understand what they should do and how to do it and preferred to stick to familiar document forms. A few students found the technicalities of the wiki platform very demanding. This can be easily overcome by brief training and preparation of light support tools such as 'cheat sheets'.

Vulnerability to attack

Since the system is open, computer support people need the ability to restore backups and apply the necessary

level of security. Several months after the first phase of the wiki was completed, the project disappeared from the server and an error message replaced it. I was horrified! The computer support staff at that time didn't have the technical knowledge to retrieve the information from the backup files in its original form with chapter divisions and link inclusions. Luckily one of the students from my class was an expert on open-source applications and returned the project to its natural state with two days of intensive work.

Not supporting a variety of file formats

The Media Wiki platform we used does not currently accommodate most common file types such as pdf, xls, doc, ppt. It isn't a good place for information previously created in these formats.

MORE WAYS TO COLLABORATE

The collaborative project has huge potential for future development of this particular project as well as a multitude of new projects. Our wiki book project serves as a bridge between academia and industry. Any Hebrew-speaking practitioner can read, and better yet, contribute to the wiki-CI book. Future classes of students can read and improve the book by finding and correcting errors, expanding chapters and adding new ones, and creating references to academic research and to magazine articles. These days I am already starting a new collaborative intelligence project which will provide strategic group analyses for Israeli companies.

We also encourage practicing competitive intelligence managers and consultants to use and contribute to the book's content. The project's biggest potential lies in making it international in scope by creating similar books in many languages. Any takers?

Beside the cooperation between academia and industry in further

developing this particular project, a wiki collaborative platform has a variety of applications, such as:

- IBM uses it for customer support www-941.ibm.com/collaboration/wiki/dashboard.action.
- Microsoft uses it for supporting its community of developers msdn2.microsoft.com/en-us/library/default.aspx.
- Ebay is developing a user's guide with tips from users www.ebaywiki.com.

Other application ideas include brain-storming, conference preparation, project development, and documentation of "lessons learned." In short, any kind of information that can generate lasting interest can be preserved in a wiki collaborative platform quickly and easily.

The future is in collaborative intelligence. Let's face it now.

Daphne R. Raban is a lecturer at the Graduate School of Management, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel. She received her Ph.D., Summa Cum Laude in 2004 from the University of Haifa and was honored by Emerald/EFMD Outstanding Doctoral Research Award in the category of Enterprise applications of internet technology (2006). Daphne's research interests are in the value of information, economics of information goods, and information/knowledge sharing. She is also a board member of the Center for the Study of the Information Society (U. of Haifa). Daphne can be reached at draban@gsb.haifa.ac.il.