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Library & Information Services versus Competitive Intelligence – too similar to be separate or too different to merge?

Examining a library and information service will invariably bring into focus other information providers within the organisation, and the need to distinguish clearly between these functions as well as to work more collaboratively will no doubt be necessary. Our "information cousins", as I call them, all manage and/or provide some sort of information and include folk from competitive intelligence, knowledge management, corporate communications, intranet content management and business analysis - to name but a few.

Take the competitive intelligence function. Are they collaborators or competitors of the library and information service, or should they merge? How should both these services be harnessed in order to develop the best outcome for the business? Chief executives are now asking these questions and want to understand and, if necessary, challenge the relationships between these functions.

During the past year I have been working on various projects in the private sector where these questions are being asked of the Library and Information Service (LIS) and that of the Competitive Intelligence (CI) service. (The same examination could equally apply to the knowledge management function, for instance). It is important to challenge assumptions and to take a fresh look at the way in which information as a whole is being managed and delivered.

There are many similarities between LIS and CI:

- Both CI and LIS acquire, manage and exploit external information sources to support business decisions.

- Many of the sources are common to both: for example news/commentaries, business information reports, patents, competitor publications and conference materials.

- The output in the form of regular alerts or internal databases or wikis containing up-to-date content has a similar role - to support the organisation's business areas and to aid decision making.

- Professionals with information seeking skills and subject knowledge as well as business awareness are managing both these areas and are also providing a specialist enquiry service.

Then perhaps the similarity stops, and significant differences emerge. Many of these, interestingly, focus on the culture surrounding the activities (and I welcome challenges to my perceptions!):

- CI is clearly a strategic activity, closely aligned with and embedded within the business units. LIS is more often than not, less strategic but performs a perhaps wider corporate service focusing on content management and delivery.

- Whilst some sources may be common to both, the use to which they are put and the way they are analysed may be different.

- CI professionals are rarely from a traditional information background (let alone from a library). They are more likely to be from a business or marketing background.

Their skills in identifying, negotiating for, exploiting and managing public domain content may therefore not be as comprehensive as that of the information professional.

- CI professionals tend to be more extrovert, outgoing and visible within their business area, whilst those in LIS cover a wider but perhaps more passive activity within the whole organisation.

- The status of CI therefore tends to be a business partner rather than a valuable support service underpinning all information activities, which characterises LIS.

- CI is thus more sexy – up to the hour, leading edge, and exciting work. The salary too is likely to be more attractive.

So what?

Well, when the focus is on cost reduction or increased efficiency, or when a new senior executive with responsibility for CI or LIS wants to examine their function in more detail or to promote its activities, they ask questions about the two services. Chances are, if they are from a business and not a LIS background these decision-makers may have a better grasp of the function, and budget, of CI than that of the LIS. This is where having a high visibility of LIS within the organisation pays dividends. Efforts can then focus on examining the two services in order to get the best out of both, rather than spending time educating people about the service.

Whether to merge or not will depend on many factors unique to each organisation, including the size, the culture, and the internal organisation of functions.

If cultural characteristics of CI and LIS functions are very different, it may be more prudent to err of the side of separate functions – many mergers struggle because of differences in culture, rather than differences in more tangible features such as financial health, user populations or specific activities and services. Another approach in determining whether to merge is to regard the activities of a LIS as laying the foundation for information activities in selecting and providing access to relevant information sources. From this, the information can be analysed and put into context by many others, including CI functions.

Whichever the choice, communication and collaboration, but not competition, is key.

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