

CI PROFESSIONALISM

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Much has been said about competitive intelligence as a profession. Little however, has been written on trying to define it, understand it, and characterize it. Early on, my good friend Liam Fahey provided sage advice on what it takes for an activity to be truly considered a profession. One key point included the need for the institutionalization of learned knowledge and experiences. More recently my associate, Ben Gilad wrote a *Competitive Intelligence* magazine article on why our profession requires formal certification (v5 n5 Sept/Oct 2002, p29-30).

SCIP itself provides an organization and forum where CI professionals can meet and share experiences and skills. Some members still worry about defining CI and the profession more clearly. And I agree with them. We can do better.

It is time we start talking (and writing) about how we go about our jobs as CI professionals. We need to focus our intellectual and professional attention on how we should be doing what CI professionals are expected to do. I call this *professionalism*.

What do I mean? All true professions require those practicing it to possess, learn, or otherwise exhibit certain inherent capabilities, skills, and knowledge. From doctors to engineers to professional athletes, each must possess a requisite body of knowledge or skill-level. Once those criteria are met, participants are considered true professionals. However, to maintain that status, individuals must continue to perform at a certain level. In some fields, professionals must continue to learn and pass qualifying exams.

THREE PILLARS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Generally speaking, there are three areas of professionalism that must be constantly maintained and developed:

- professional level performance
- quality of the performance
- knowledge of the profession

A true professional constantly strives to maintain all three areas, while at the same time improving their ability to perform and produce superior results. I call these three areas the pillars of CI Professionalism.

1. Professional-level performance

A CI professional must make every effort to ensure that his or her client gets the best intelligence possible – not just your best effort, but the best possible intelligence. This means going beyond what we as individuals are capable of and engaging others with better access and greater skills, both inside and outside our organizations.

It also includes getting the resources and funds it takes to do a totally professional job. We owe it to our clients to deliver the best possible intelligence products and services by:

- diligently searching all possible information sources
- proficiently using both human and technical sources and tools
- utilizing the best subject-matter experts and techniques in our analysis
- producing the most insightful and objective intelligence possible
- insuring that our results are clearly understandable and actionable

We owe our clients **the best possible** intelligence!

2. Quality of the performance

We must insure that all our CI work and its results are honest and objective. In the final analysis, the basic quality of our work is its credibility. That credibility rests solely on our user's perception of the CI that we deliver. If it is not seen as truthful and objective, all our efforts are for naught.

In addition, our CI must also be useful and actionable or there will be no need for it, no matter how honest we are. The professional actions that underpin this pillar constitute the integrity of our work:

- Taking professional care to ensure that your intelligence collection and analysis are *intellectually* independent, i.e., that neither your collection nor analysis activities are compromised or unfairly influenced by the other. (This is best done by separate collection and analysis operations so that the CI being collected is not *seen* as purposefully supporting the analytical results.)
- Ensuring that all CI collection is legal and ethical and in no way puts the company in legal jeopardy. This goes beyond SCIP's Code of Ethics and requires that we develop a practical working knowledge of all the laws and regulations that affect our activities. We must seek the assistance of legal professionals when appropriate. Maintaining and using this legal knowledge requires an on-going effort and must extend

- to all geographical areas where our CI operations are conducted.
- Conducting analysis that is perceived as fair and balanced, and producing results that are considered truly objective. Its underlying assumptions and analytical logic must be clear for all to see and examine. The results must be independently derivable from the available information and facts: the final product provides the CI clients both analytical insight and foresight. And the effort overall must be seen as independent, objective, and professional.

In the final analysis our CI efforts and products must never be seen as playing any favorites, no matter how much we may agree or disagree with the outcomes and business actions they might affect. Our credibility depends on our objectivity and honesty, and the integrity of all those involved in the process.

3. Knowledge of the profession

We, as CI professionals must be learning, always seeking new sources, methods, and skills. To paraphrase the old Army recruiting ads: 'Be the best CI professional we can be.' This includes:

- Seeking professional education wherever it can be obtained: universities, professional workshops, SCIP conferences and training sessions. When possible, creating in-house education and training opportunities. Plan and systematically educate yourself, your associates, and your clients by all means available.
- Learning from the experience and knowledge of other CI professionals: at SCIP conferences and chapter meetings, networking with others throughout the field, and seeking new learning opportunities from CI professionals and educators, worldwide.
- Utilizing all the educational and learning opportunities you have to constantly advance the state-of-the-art of your organization's CI program. This is the only way you can ensure that your CI efforts are capable of producing the best possible intelligence. Learn, grow, and constantly seek new knowledge!

When you are making every effort to develop and maintain these three pillars, you can be assured that your CI efforts are truly professional. That is

what I mean by professionalism: constantly seeking to be the best that we can be and to create the organizational capabilities to produce the best possible intelligence!

This short essay is not the end of this quest for professionalism. I intend it to begin a dialogue among all CI professionals, to define how we should go about our jobs and constantly strive to improve that process for all who come after us. Now it is your turn.

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