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THE POWER OF INFORMATION: HOW BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE SHAPES A COMPANY'S ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract. *Relevance of the topic.* Against the background of globalization and the rapid development of information technologies, the role of competitive intelligence in the strategic management of modern business is increasingly increasing. For organizations, general knowledge of the market is no longer enough - to ensure the effectiveness of decisions, an in-depth analysis of both competitors and various elements of the business environment is required. The expansion of the digital space has opened up new opportunities for obtaining information through open sources (OSINT), but at the same time it has also raised new ethical and legal challenges, which makes this topic particularly relevant for modern business practice. *Aim and object of the research.* The aim of the paper is to evaluate the modern practices of business intelligence, the methods of obtaining information from open and closed sources, their classification and efficiency. The object of the research is the methods used in the competitive intelligence process, their legal and ethical boundaries, as well as their impact on business decisions. *Research methods.* The paper uses descriptive and analytical research methods. The analysis was carried out based on international literature and expert assessments (e.g. Leonard Fuld's models), as well as practical examples. Information gathering methods are classified according to legality and ethics, which facilitates a comparative analysis of their effectiveness and risks. *Practical significance.* The paper indicates the need for systematic implementation of business intelligence in both large and medium-sized and small enterprises. The presence of an effective intelligence system not only increases the competitive position of the company, but also reduces strategic and operational risks, improves the speed of adaptation to the market and ensures the achievement of long-term plans. The need for training specialists as part of the national strategy is also emphasized, which will facilitate the legal and ethical use of intelligence tools in the modern Georgian business environment. *Results.* The study showed that despite the growing importance of open sources (which, according to experts, often provide 95–99% of the information needed for business intelligence), the highest strategic value is often found in semi-closed and difficult-to-access data. At the same time, some methods of information gathering – such as surveys of former employees, test purchases, detailed study of a similar product or pseudo-marketing research – are legal and effective, but on a tight leash in terms of ethical standards.

Keywords: competitive intelligence, information security, business strategy, ethics and legal framework, information gathering methods.

JEL Classification: L10, D83, M21, O32, K42

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, when man separated from the animal world and began to develop, he has always shown interest in the existence of his relatives. To satisfy this, one of the important sources of information was and remains – curiosity, observation of other people's activities, imitation and downloading the necessary news.

Imitation of other people's activities, as an integral component of the historical development of agriculture, changed its form and manifestation in the wake of the evolution of the means of production. Therefore, in the historical aspect, intelligence of agricultural activities is older than military and political intelligence (Otinashvili et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2020).

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Information and intelligence complement and stimulate each other today and millennia ago, intelligence has developed along with humanity. Since it is close to human nature and its psychology. Therefore, intelligence activities are as old as our civilization (Paradza and Daramola, 2021).

As the first example of commercial intelligence, we can consider the so-called romantic story, which dates back to the 15th century BC. It tells about a Chinese princess who, traveling with her lover abroad, wears a straw hat made of wildflowers, in which silkworms were hidden for transportation across the border (Muntean, 2018; Rao-Graham et al., 2019). China is still considered the birthplace of the first theoretical studies of intelligence. Where, already in the 4th century BC, the work of the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu "The Art of War" was published (Tzu, 2008).

Through well-organized intelligence, the Roman Senate received the necessary comprehensive information on the country of interest – starting with the characteristics of the climate and access roads, ending with the fertility of the lands, the traditions of the local population (Rocha, 2015; Porter, 2008). As well as their hard work and fighting ability, and the existence of food and beverage supplies (Petrini and Pozzebon, 2009; Seddigh and et al., 2023).

Of particular interest were the places where the treasures of kings and nobles were stored and the determination of their values. The argument that the main goal of the Roman Empire was to wage wars of conquest is naive. All wars were preceded by a well-thought-out strategy of geopolitical and business interests, the main task of which was to conquer rich countries and territories. For example, they were of little interest in the then territory of Siberia, since its resource potential was unknown.

Rejoicing in their military power, the Roman emperors knew that, in the event of possessing "interesting" information in advance, their legions would be unable to provide adequate resistance to either the refined organization of the Hellenes, the wild courage of the Spartans, or the iron wrath of local rulers. The planning of a specific military operation in a country of interest was primarily dictated by what the expected victory could bring.

Purposeful and well-organized intelligence allowed the Roman Empire to extract from the conquered countries a comprehensive "octopus": gold, silver, pearls, as well as silk, the price of which in ancient civilizations was equal to gold. This contributed to its political and economic influence in the world (Rane et al., 2024).

Later, in the Middle Ages, along with state intelligence, private intelligence services of trading companies of Northern Italy arose in the trading cities of the Mediterranean. Venice and Genoa became the first centers of commercial intelligence, where business secrets were valued more than political ones.

The first private intelligence service was created in the 14th century by Florentine bankers. However, the documented date of the creation of business intelligence is considered to be the 15th century, when the "House of Fugger" in the German city of Augsburg, for the first time in the world, used competitive intelligence methods (Häberlein, 2012; Abuselidze and Zoidze, 2023).

Under the leadership of Jakob Fugger, a conspiratorial "network" functioned fruitfully, the basis of which was numerous representative offices of factories in various European countries (Youvan, 2024).

The Habsburgs, who were the main opponents of the Fuggers, went bankrupt and plunged the South German banking system into a financial "abyss", which even led to a change in the political elite of that time (Veshapidze and Otinashvili, 2021; Walter and Kalus, 2013).

The Rothschilds became famous for the effectiveness of their own intelligence service. At the end of the 18th century, five brothers founded banks in European capitals – London, Paris, Vienna, Frankfurt and Naples (Singh et al., 2023). At the end of the 18th century, representatives of the southern states of the USA spent considerable sums of money to organize competitive intelligence in English factories in Lancashire, as a result of which they were able to illegally obtain working drawings of weaving machines. It was from here that the creation and development of cotton production in America began.

Business intelligence developed along with competition, although despite its antiquity, the term "business intelligence" itself appeared only in the 19th century and is described as a set of methods that provide an advantage as a result of the operational collection and processing of political and economic news.

According to the American scientist Herbert Meyer, in the period between the First and Second World Wars, using methods such as price wars and protectionism on the part of states. By illegally copying technologies, the Japanese textile industry defeated its British and American competitors. The Japanese government also managed to compensate domestic firms and enterprises for high customs duties (Meyer, 1999).

Competitive intelligence was improving along with the development of economics and business, and of course competitive analysis and information technologies (Porter and Strategy, 1980). The turning point in this regard was the 20th century, in the second half of which intelligence was separated into an independent direction of business security.

By the beginning of the 1990s, international and national societies of competitive intelligence professionals were formed, which established business relations through periodical publications, conferences

and trainings. Today, modern technologies allow for active exchange of information, close coordination and implementation of joint projects.

The ethics of espionage methods take a back seat when it comes to important interests. Businesses have used and continue to use every opportunity to defeat their competitors.

2. Methodology

The paper focuses on business intelligence – its evolution, practical applications, ethical and unethical approaches, as well as contemporary challenges to its application.

The methodological framework for business intelligence research is based on a multi-level approach that combines historical analysis, content research, comparative-analytical approach, case study, and analysis from an ethical perspective. The methodology used in this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role and functioning of business intelligence, both theoretically and practically.

The study begins with a study of the historical roots of intelligence as a social and economic phenomenon. A descriptive historical method is used, through which the evolution of business intelligence from prehistoric times to the present day is reviewed – starting with the strategies of the Roman Empire and medieval trade intelligence, ending with modern corporate intelligence systems.

As for the main database, it represents professional, academic and statistical sources, including: data from government agencies, reports and presentations obtained from open sources, open archives of industries, academic studies on the theoretical foundations of business intelligence.

The material under study was analyzed in terms of content and practical mechanisms, forms and areas of their application in different periods and regions were identified.

The paper uses hypothetical examples based on real business situations (e.g., the production of semi-finished meat products). The model was created to define mechanisms for market monitoring, information collection and strategic assessment. The model is based on:

– An assessment of the market structure;
– Differentiation between open and closed information;
– Classification of information acquisition methods (direct/indirect, ethical/unethical, contact/distance).

The study uses the differentiation of strategic and tactical intelligence tasks. Based on this structure, information types are classified and appropriate analytical models are used (e.g. OSINT – Open Source Intelligence).

The paper presents a methodology that uses integrated approaches from management, marketing, economics, security and psychology. This provides a multi-layered analysis of the intelligence function – both as an information base and as a strategic decision-making tool.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Evolution of Competitive Intelligence: From the Internet Era to Artificial Intelligence

The massive spread of the Internet in the 21st century changed everything. The World Wide Web opened up enormous opportunities for competitive intelligence. Search algorithms and the corresponding technological support made it possible to process huge amounts of data quickly.

Registration of companies and access to advanced digital resources is growing. In the competitive intelligence market, narrow-profile directions have been distinguished, new professions have been created, specialists in the field of price and website monitoring have appeared, as well as specialists in user reactions and company behavior in social networks (Ahmad, 2015; Haupt et al., 2015).

By the beginning of the 2010s, the volume of information that business analysis systems had to process had grown colossally (Veshapidze et al., 2022). Accordingly, the capabilities of information technologies had also increased (Veshapidze and Karchava, 2022).

In parallel, open data analysis systems (Open-source intelligence, OSINT) were developed. A kind of "smart archives" that allow us to determine the connections between people and processes.

It is difficult to even predict what opportunities the second decade of the 21st century will offer us in terms of achievements in competitive intelligence with the help of advanced technologies. It is likely that the role of artificial intelligence will increase even more (Abuselidze and Zoidze, 2024).

Many prestigious Western universities offer special courses in business security and intelligence. Also, in some countries, excellent students of higher education institutions can additionally study intelligence skills if they wish. This is especially developed in the countries of South Asia.

Japan deserves attention in this regard, where organized competitive intelligence structures work properly both at the private-corporate and state levels. This is one of the main reasons for the "Japanese miracle", which began in the 50s of the last century (Valentin and Silviu, 2014). Many firms began to copy successful companies from America and other countries (Zheng and Khalid, 2022). For example,

the modern history of "Sony" originates from copying the pre-war American electric tape recorder.

The same can be said about China, whose economic success is largely due to business intelligence. Many Chinese colleges teach the theoretical foundations of intelligence. Outstanding young people are sent on "missions" to developed Western countries. This is precisely the result of copying a significant part of the goods produced in the world. Georgia is a country with a small market globally, but if we look at the range of imported agricultural, construction and other goods used in businesses, hypermarkets or Eliava Market, we will find that a large part of them is copied by China, based on analogies of developed Western countries and leading companies (Lordkipanidze, 2024). This is precisely the result of the 8-10% growth in GDP in 2000-2019, which made China the second largest economy in the world.

Therefore, in response to many business challenges, competitive intelligence gradually developed in accordance with the needs of those times (Benny, 2013). Even today, it keeps pace with the development of events. Well-organized competitive intelligence is not limited to studying competitors. It works systematically with a complex assessment of the environment, starting with advanced technologies and ending with specific business operations, in which the secret of a particular firm is hidden.

Without intelligence, it is no longer possible to conduct productive activities in competitive conditions (Bernardino, 2013). As a result, business intelligence is an essential component of the corporate culture of conducting modern business (Otinashvili, 2025; Bhambri and Khang, 2024).

Competitive intelligence is a legal way of collecting and analyzing information, which allows us to determine the capabilities and intentions of competitors, to discover their strengths and weaknesses (Olszak et al., 2021; Otinashvili and Zavrashvili, 2021; Madureira et al., 2021). In such cases, information is processed and prepared through legal channels, in accordance with ethical norms.

The information obtained should correspond to the so-called "Five Ws": 1) who – who; 2) what – what; 3) when – when; 4) where – where; 5) why – why. The above-mentioned "Five Ws" are associated with the name of the English expert Joseph Kipling. Therefore, it is also called the "Kipling method" (Bobbert et al., 2022).

The data obtained should allow for predictions about competitors, as well as be subject to continuous verification in the dynamics of development, taking into account that changes in the business environment are quite frequent (Chalmeta and Ferrer Estevez, 2023; Lokeshkumar et al., 2018).

Competitive intelligence tasks can be tactical and strategic. Tactical tasks involve the collection and analysis of operational information related to current technological and commercial tasks. Strategic tasks involve the collection and analysis of information about the economy, politics, technology, and other global processes.

Information is collected mainly from open sources: the Internet, television, electronic and printed media, materials from various professional gatherings, reports submitted to state bodies that do not constitute a commercial secret. The larger the intelligence object, the more information about it.

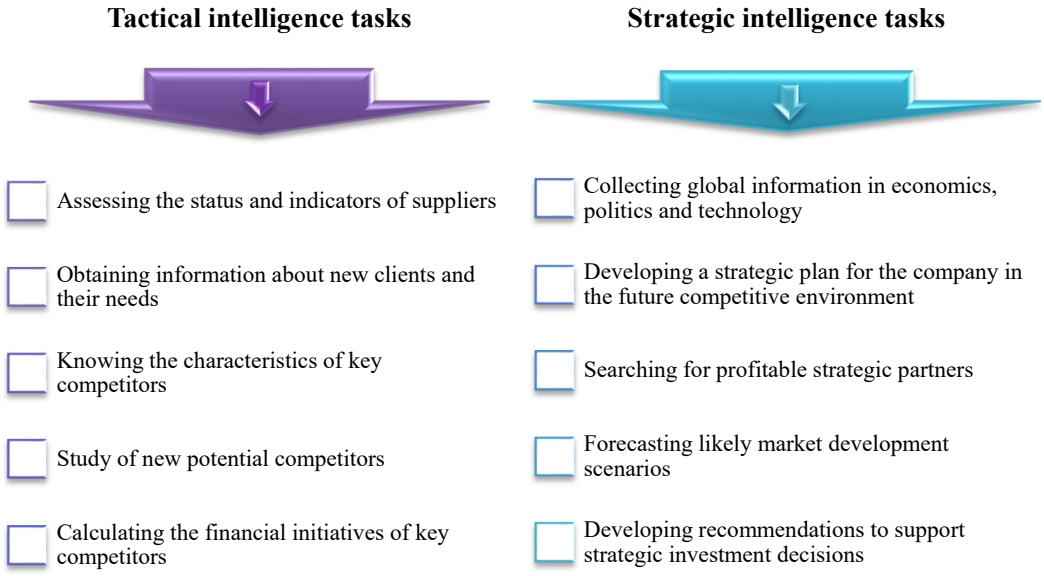

Figure 1. Tactical and strategic tasks of competitive intelligence

Source: Compiled by the authors

3.2. Competitive Intelligence in Action: Legal Resources and Forbidden Tricks

The correct selection of information sources is crucial. According to Leonard Fuld, a leading expert in this field, 99% of the information used in business intelligence is obtained completely legally, from open sources. The main thing is to find the remaining 1%, which contains commercial secrets. Interestingly, his own assessment for 1992 was 95% and 5%, respectively (Journal of European Business).

Important information is obtained from direct competitors, its sources are:

1. Survey of common customers and suppliers;
2. Collection of data from former employees;
3. Test purchases;
4. Organization of cooperation attempts on behalf of one's own or a potential supplier;
5. Survey under the pretext of marketing research;
6. Organizing and maintaining an acquaintance with a competitor's employee on behalf of a third party;
7. Using anonymous Internet acquaintances;

The following two methods are justified if significant funds are involved;

8. Organizing a merger attempt on one's own behalf;
9. Organizing an investment attempt (full or partial acquisition of a competitor's business) on behalf of a third party.

The following methods violate the laws "On Commercial Secrets", "On Police", "On Public Service". As well as the Criminal Code – on the inviolability of private life.

Unauthorized access to information systems, abuse of official authority. Illegal entrepreneurial activity, as well as serious crimes related to recruitment – blackmail, threats, bribery, etc. Therefore, the above methods are given for educational purposes, as well as for defense and resistance. Their use is not recommended.

10. Use of "necessary" connections: in state and law enforcement agencies, in the banking sector, in criminal structures, etc.;
11. Penetration into a competitor's information system and copying data;
12. Unauthorized use of audio and video surveillance equipment;
13. Recruitment of a competitor's personnel;
14. Implantation of one's own personnel;
15. External surveillance of key managers' contacts;
16. Use of a competitor's employee's "close friend" as a source of information;
17. Organization of sexual contact with subsequent use as an informant, etc.

It is worth noting that in order to recognize information as reliable, it is necessary to verify it from two or three different sources. The methods presented serve the main goal of the intelligence unit – to achieve maximum results with minimal costs for the safe functioning of the company (Lordkipanidze, 2020).

Let's consider the practical application of competitive intelligence with the following example. Let's say we decided to start a meat processing plant: khinkali, pelmeni, cutlets, etc. production. Naturally, we will start by collecting information about the given business, the circumstances surrounding it and the established rules (Zoidze, 2023). The main object of interest, as always, is competitors (Tavera Romero et al., 2021; Kara and Firat, 2018). We need to find out how the given market segment is distributed among them. We need to study customers, suppliers, potential partners, counterparties, etc.

We start collecting data from open sources. However, depending on the specifics of the business, it may be necessary to use confidential data. Unfortunately, in our country there is no agency that possesses comprehensive information on sectoral markets and trends in specific businesses operating there. At this point, business intelligence should be involved, which, as mentioned above, is an effective tool for studying the competitive environment and represents the targeted collection of information on competitors, business strategies and tactics, which will help us make managerial decisions.

Open information in this business is: sales prices, storage terms, delivery terms, etc. Closed information is: management features, nuances of product cost, sales volume, prices of semi-finished products, employee salaries, their moral and psychological data, etc.

As is known, the methods of obtaining information are divided into:

1. Direct and indirect methods. Direct means receiving information directly from the primary source. In our case, we can find out the price of manufactured goods at the place of its sale – in a specific market. However, there is a selling price and an acceptable price for the market. If the first is open information, the second is semi-closed and its determination requires some effort.

The indirect method is a method of calculating the associated indicator. If we are interested in the cost of manufacturing, the aforementioned semi-finished products, we will also need to use indirect methods (Zoidze et al., 2023). In particular, taking into account the constituent ingredients and energy carriers, as well as utility and transportation costs, etc., which implies carrying out certain calculations.

2. Distinguish between: remote and direct contact methods. Remote involves observation and study from a distance. Contact is carried out directly on the territory of the business object.

The use of each depends on the specifics of the work to be performed. For example, in the case of the same semi-finished products, it is possible to find out

the price remotely via the Internet or by phone call. As for the cost price, here a "visit" and contact are already required.

3. In terms of ethics, there are seemingly less ethical methods that do not violate legal norms. The less known a competitor is, the scarcer the information about it is in open sources. Therefore, it is often necessary to obtain data from the competitor's environment or directly from him. To determine the cost of meat processing plants, it is necessary to "interview" with current or former employees of the facility, suppliers of raw materials, drivers-salesmen, etc.

4. Clearly unethical methods that do not seem to violate legal norms. Obtaining information through covert surveillance, for example, under the pretext of offering better conditions, raw materials, etc.

5. Unethical and illegal actions. This group includes illegal penetration into a company using special equipment. Listening to telephone conversations, penetrating information systems, copying data using audio and video surveillance equipment.

Abuse of official authority is also a serious crime: blackmail, threats of violence, bribery, use of necessary connections in state, law enforcement and criminal structures, surveillance of contacts of key individuals and managers, etc.

5. Conclusions

Competitive Intelligence is one of the most important tools in modern business, enabling organizations to make informed, strategically balanced decisions to successfully operate in the market. In the 21st century, the dramatic increase in the availability of information – especially through the Internet and open sources – has completely changed the landscape of business intelligence. In a digitalized world, superficial knowledge of the market is no longer enough to succeed. A systematic, structured approach to competitors, customers, technological changes, and global trends is required.

Competitive intelligence is becoming not just a process of gathering information, but a component of strategic management that combines technological, analytical, legal and managerial competencies. Its effective use is critical for sustainable business development, innovative solutions and successful operation in global markets.

In order to effectively use competitive intelligence methods, it is necessary to find highly qualified specialists and create a team that will be distinguished by such qualities as: flexible and non-standard thinking, sociability, endurance and the ability to hide emotions, intuition, if necessary, artistry, etc.

Therefore, business intelligence is an important component of company management. In the conditions of modern dynamic competition, it is a necessary lever for business success. However, this activity can be effective only when the company's management is aware of the importance of this unit and gives it a worthy place in the unified management system of the company.

It is also important to emphasize that competitive intelligence does not only involve studying competitors – it is a complex analysis of the business environment, which includes political, economic, technological, social and legal factors. It is through this complex approach that a company can not only adapt to current realities, but also anticipate market changes and occupy a stable, competitive position.

Finally, modern business is increasingly unthinkable without effective intelligence. This is not only a technical process of information retrieval, but also an integral part of strategic management, which requires professionalism, ethical standards and high-level analytical skills. Competitive intelligence becomes both a defense mechanism and a development tool, which, if used correctly, becomes one of the company's main competitive advantages.

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