

BABES-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
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STUDIES

*Competitive Intelligence and Business Information from a
National and International Perspective. The Standpoint of
Private Economic Operators in Romania*

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

PhD advisor:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Adrian Liviu Ivan

PhD student:

Adina Mihăescu

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Within the context of globalisation, along with the intersection of economies and the increase in competition, being competitive has become an essential element in order for companies to survive and thrive on the global market. Competitiveness can be perceived from several standpoints, such as between nations and their national economies, as well as in what regards private companies. In order for nations to grow, they require investments, boosting their productivity, export rate and available jobs; they must also support entrepreneurship, technological development and innovation.

What is more, companies need their own national authorities to be involved by creating appropriate laws and regulations meant to uphold an increased level of competitiveness. Thus, it is the responsibility of political entities to take measures regarding the management of the internal economic environment. This can be carried out by boosting the competitiveness of national economic operators.

Both competition and competitiveness are standard characteristics of our current economic environment worldwide. Competition, however, is not an intrinsically economic attribute, as it may be observed in fields manifold. On the other hand, competitiveness cannot be split from the idea of economics, since it refers to having leverage over one's competitors, both in macroeconomics (on a national scale) and in microeconomics (related to businesses and to the products and services they offer).

Information can only be useful in a decision-making process if it is turned into what we might call *intelligence*. Although the two terms may overlap sometimes, the semantic difference plays a big role in our understanding of the concept. Intelligence refers to processing information in such a way that it becomes meaningful, comprehensive and useful in the decision-making phase.

The concept of intelligence can be found in many domains, oftentimes regarded as a prerequisite of the state and therefore associated with the activity of state security, but also distinguishable in economic activities (economic intelligence).

In itself, economic intelligence is by no means a new concept, as gathering and disseminating data have been taking place since time immemorial. Granted, these activities

were almost exclusively state-led, but economic liberalisation, technology and globalisation have made it necessary for private companies to undertake such activities, too.

The economic environment is constantly changing and evolving, and dealing with these changes requires professionally-driven focused actions in the informational field.

Regarding “the activities of gathering, processing and analysis information both from and about the external environment, in order to support decision-makers in making the best choices and to offer a competitive advantage to the business”¹, these represent a privilege of Competitive Intelligence structures.

The importance of using CI information and techniques has been long debated in literature, both within the scientific and academic environment, as well as by professional practitioners in the domain. They all highlight the advantages of CI, its beneficial nature and the ways in which it might be used. This study shall attempt to offer a comprehensive understanding of the domain of CI, with the aid of pre-existing literature and concepts.

The association between CI and espionage activities, albeit frequent, is completely erroneous, and the present study will discuss the reasons why there is a certain degree of confusion about the two concepts.

Given the fact that, in Romania, there is little research in this domain, CI is less understood or applied by companies. It is precisely these gaps that make a varied kind of research possible, allowing for distinct and unique approaches.

This is also the reasoning behind choosing CI as a research topic for the present work, that is, the attempt to study a relatively new phenomenon, which is nevertheless paramount in the shaping of our business environment and our national economy.

This study proposes an analysis of the domain of Competitive Intelligence in Romania, seen through the lens of the private business sector, whose relationship to and understanding of CI are defining elements in building an overview of the economic environment.

¹ Hamid Tahmasebifard, *The role of competitive intelligence and its sub-types on achieving market performance*, Cogent Business & Management, 2018, p. 1.

Due to the fact that CI blends the domain of intelligence studies into that of economics, it is self-explanatory that the phenomenon and its implications have a high degree of complexity. Therefore, the present study has availed of qualitative research methodology techniques, as these offer the possibility of describing and explaining various phenomenons starting from an empirical basis².

It has been considered that the best approach to obtain the required information is using semi-structured interviews as methods of data collection, because of the nature of said data (informational rather than mathematical). By gaining access to such data, one may identify the motivation behind a specific course of action or a perception, the respondent's own perspective on a given topic or its significance in the respondent's perception³.

The method of inductive topic-based analysis has been used in the data analysis phase⁴; in other words, the hypotheses were generated by observing recurrent phenomena and connections rather than starting from pre-established assumptions. 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with representatives of multiple companies who do business on the territory of Romania (though not exclusively), within the span of a year. The interviewees were chosen according to the principle of diversity, in order to represent several fields of work that will be described in detail further on: banking, consulting, software, commerce, etc.

The results of the present research, as well as the visions and perceptions of the interviewees, will be included in the final chapter of the thesis, along with its limitations and further directions for continuing the research.

The *Classification of Occupations in Romania* identifies a series of possible occupations in the informational domain, and uses the term "expert/manager of business information".⁵ One might deduce that there has been an attempt on behalf of the state

² Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1994, pp 7-8.

³ Florentina Scârnci, *Îndrumar de cercetare calitativă în științele socio umane*, Editura Universității Transilvania, Brașov, 2006, p.55.

⁴ Adriana Băban, *Metodologia cercetării calitative*, Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002, p.34.

⁵ Ministerul Muncii și Solidarității Sociale, Descrierea grupelor de ocupații, https://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/Munca/COR/ISCO_08_lista_alfabetica_ocupatii_062023.pdf, accesat la 01.02. 2023.

authorities to translate the concept of Competitive Intelligence into Romanian, yet throughout this study, the well-established English counterpart shall be used. On the one hand, this choice is further supported by the fact that in Romanian, the term lacks the lexical concept of “competitiveness”, which is precisely the point of gathering business-oriented information. On the other hand, both in academic literature and among business professionals in Romania, the English term “Competitive Intelligence” is the preferred choice.

Competitive Intelligence “is a systematic programme involving the collection and analysis of information concerning the dealings of one’s competitors and general business tendencies to reach the objectives of a given company”.⁶

Therefore, the systematic process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information regarding one’s competitors, as well as about industry trends and market dynamics, bears the name of “competitive intelligence”. This implies the monitoring and the understanding of a competitive framework, in order to anticipate potential changes, to identify opportunities and to diminish risks.

The present research wishes to study the way in which Competitive Intelligence is perceived by companies that are active on the Romanian market. Moreover, a secondary objective is to increase public awareness regarding the domain of CI and its significance.

The research question towards whose answer the present study wishes to arrive is: “How do Romanian business operators perceive the domain of Competitive Intelligence”? One argument to support this choice is the fact that the CI domain is not only relatively new in Romania, but also insufficiently studied. The principles of CI are mostly seen in connection to the domain of state security, rather than to the private sector and to the companies that operate in it.

The informational field has long been excluded from the scope of state responsibilities, due to its complex nature which involves gathering and analysing data. At the given moment, there is a wide range of professionals working with information: from scientists and scholars to journalists, intelligence service employees and private analysts. In

⁶ Larry Kahaner, *Competitive Intelligence. How to gather, analyze, and use information to move your business to the top*, Simon & Schuster Inc, 1996, p.16.

fact, it is more difficult to find a domain that does not require the processing of information at all. Therefore, the conventional rhetoric which attributes the domain of intelligence exclusively to state affairs must be changed.

As a result, researching competitiveness among economic operators becomes paramount. Their degree of competitiveness leads to the shaping of Romanian economy, as well as to its paths towards development.

The data obtained from the present study have increased applicability. First of all, it can be used in the domain of economic security (and, respectively, in the domain of state security, which encompasses the former). Second of all, it can be relevant in the domain of economic science, such as in analysing competitiveness, strategy development, market analysis and in computing economic indicators. The obtained information must be processed by economic professionals, as they are the only ones prepared enough to understand and analyse economic processes (both in the case of microeconomics/companies and macroeconomics/on a national economic level) and the extent to which these impact businesses.

Competitive Intelligence, thus, involves two kinds of professionals: data collection and analysis specialists and professionals in the field of economics. Their expertise in putting together comprehensive reports is necessary for stakeholders to make decisions regarding courses of action and strategies.

On the basis of the interviews carried out with representatives of operational Romanian businesses, the present study wishes to identify what perceptions they have regarding Competitive Intelligence, how they relate to it, what plans, perspectives and assumptions they have about it, altogether designing a framework for the understanding of this relatively new phenomenon in our country, as well as of its directions of development.

In this study, Competitive Intelligence has been approached from an epistemological perspective. It is clear from the results of the research carried out that the domain is insufficiently studied in Romania and, all the more, insufficiently recognised and understood in the private sector.

Similarly, competitiveness is not exclusive to the private sector, but rather, it encapsulates the interests of the political environment, both on a national and a European

scale. These structures must pay close attention in this respect, as competitiveness is a *sine qua non* principle of sustainable economic development.

The interviews carried out for this study took place between 2022 and 2023, a rather economically uncertain, post-pandemic timeframe. Because of the fact that the domain of business information is not an easily accessible one, well-established enterprises (that is, businesses whose turnover exceeded RON1.000.000 in the past three years) have been selected as case studies. Although more companies were contacted for the study, the final number of respondents was 23.

In the present study, the selection of the interviewees was carried out according to the principle of diversity; therefore, the respondents come from a wide range of fields of work and they are (also) operational on the Romanian market.

Prior to the interviews, most respondents required the signing of a non-disclosure agreement, which stated that the name of the enterprise and of the representative, as well as their position in the company would remain confidential, along with the data and information made available by them. They also wished to know beforehand what the topic of the interview would be, what kind of questions would be asked, and more details about the person conducting the interview.

The first questions addressed were common to all the interviewees, and later on took a different approach, according to whether or not the companies in question carry out CI activities. This approach has been chosen because it seemed the most logical for the purpose of obtaining data regarding the respondents' motivation and perception.

Despite the interviewees unanimous agreement that information is essential in a business environment, not all of them expressed an interest in its active, systematic pursuit. Similarly, they all claimed that analysing one's competitors is important, yet not all are preoccupied with doing so, especially not in a scientific and systematic way.

Only 8 of the respondents came into contact with the concept of Competitive Intelligence while operating in the business environment, and others happened upon in non-business-related contexts. A further observation can be made regarding the interviewees'

difficulty in defining the concept of CI. Granted, its definition is complex and can have many nuances, which may only be discovered by studying academic literature.

It has also been found that there are companies both in and outside of Romania that offer consulting in CI, as well as entities that have implemented courses in this domain. However, the respondents were only able to name such companies on an international level, and no Romanian ones.

This phenomenon sheds light on the fact that Romanian enterprises are not sufficiently well-known, and that what they have on offer has not infiltrated the market enough. One can understand the reasoning why the companies that wish to implement CI-related activities prefer experienced consultancies, with an extensive client base and that have already proven their abilities and expertise. Nevertheless, there was one interviewee that was able to name a Romanian company specialised in CI courses, namely ICSS Romania.

Concomitantly, few businesses were known to be offering CI-related services, and only 12 interviewees could claim that. The larger part of these 12 are also active in the domain of CI, so it is only natural for them to be more informed about it. Yet nobody wished to speculate what other companies might be involved in CI, since they did not have factual evidence in that respect.

A recurrent point made throughout this study is that there is confusion between CI and espionage services. This can partly stem from the fact that the culture of business information is underdeveloped in Romania, given that our capitalist economy has emerged fairly recently.

On the other hand, it might be more difficult to translate the term *intelligence* to the reality of the private sector, since it is often linked to informational services. There is no denying that CI works with open sources of information, but even so, a certain degree of confusion is bound to exist, especially for a non-professional in the domain.

Out of the 23 participants, 7 have claimed that they are engaged in CI activities, and their profiles match those of well-developed, multinational companies. They added that they had been involved in CI ever since they had entered the Romanian market, which leads

to the conclusion that such practices are commonplace and that multinational entities are well aware and acquainted with them.

This can be disadvantageous for those Romanian companies that do not carry out CI activities, do not pay much attention to their competitors or that are simply not aware of other companies doing it. Therefore, a larger company is able to gain invaluable insight into a market and its operators, whereas a smaller company cannot benefit from this leverage.

The interviewees who carry out CI activities are entirely satisfied and, also, able to name the benefits brought by CI to their companies. However, this kind of information is usually kept confidential, not only in the public eye, but also in that of their own employees.

Excluding a small amount of people in managerial and decision-making positions, most employees are not aware of CI being used in the company. This is deemed unnecessary or even potentially dangerous, in case the information is misunderstood. Here, it is important to yet again insist on the erroneous perception regarding CI and the negative connotations of espionage services. Companies choose not to educate their human resources because they prefer the safer option, and, in turn, employees remain unaware of CI practices.

The secrecy shrouding CI is also clear from the fact that none of the interviewees were willing to elaborate on what kind of CI practices their companies employ. The details they did offer, however, concerned the reports they obtained. These have an irregular frequency, as well as various topics and recipients, which implies that there is no standard procedure regarding CI, but rather, each company prefers to employ their CI department differently, according to their own needs.

As far as the previously-mentioned department is concerned, only two companies said that they have their own CI department, with employees specifically trained for CI purposes. The rest of them prefer to collaborate with external consultancies. It might be deduced that these firms are not Romanian-based, since the respondents could not name any earlier. Out of the two companies with their own CI departments, one claimed that theirs is a relatively recent development, and that prior to its setting-up, they used to collaborate with consultancies too.

A further recurrent claim in the study was the fact that there is increased difficulty in finding specialists in the CI domain. It can thus be argued that there is a shortage of qualified personnel in the informational domain in Romania, which results in the trend to choose foreign companies for CI collaboration, from countries in which there is already a long-standing tradition in the field.

The present research also showed that there is a series of CI courses available online, organised either by various businesses or by NGOs. As far as the academic environment is concerned, there is a master's programme offered by the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University, that is entitled *Security, Intelligence and Competitivity in Organisations*⁷. Furthermore, the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest offers, in conjunction with the Centre for Advanced Strategies, a postgraduate course entitled *International Economic Intelligence*.⁸ Therefore, there are opportunities to train much-needed specialists in the field of CI, as there are study programmes for it, as well as programmes for professional training or conversion.

The interviewed microenterprises and smaller-sized companies claim that they do not engage in CI activities, as do most medium-sized ones as well. As it has been previously mentioned, one may notice that CI is of interest for bigger companies, which have expanded internationally. Smaller companies believe that CI either requires significant funding or it is not of significance for microenterprises and it would consequently not be worth the financial effort.

This kind of significant allocation of funds, though talked about, is more of a supposition rather than a reality, because the interviewees do not know any details about how much it would cost to actually organise a CI course, an expertise or a collaboration with a specialised entity. Given the recent nature of the domain, there is still an assumption that the latter requires high costs. However, without actual knowledge about it, companies are unable to decide in an informed manner whether the potential benefits would outweigh the costs, or what value-for-money they could obtain.

⁷Universităţii Babeş-Bolyai, Facultatea de Istorie și Filosofie, <https://hiphi.ubbcluj.ro/studii/master/SICO.html>, accesat la 01.05.2023.

⁸ Intelligence Economic Internațional, <https://int-e.ro/>, accesat la 01.05.2023.

For the most part, nonetheless, the representatives of the companies that do not carry out CI activities do not exclude this possibility. They seem open to these business methods and they claim that they might attempt to implement them in the future, but that they are still sceptical about how much budget they could allocate to them. The level of scepticism is high chiefly because of their perceiving of the necessary funding being considerable.

However, regardless of whether they are or are not involved in CI, an overwhelming number of the companies interviewed anticipate a development of the CI domain in Romania in the foreseeable future. Their claim is based on the development of technology, globalisation and digitalisation. What is more, bigger multinational companies bring *know-how*, new procedures and methods of doing business, and their willingness to adapt boosts economic development.

In their turn, smaller, newer or developing companies will have to keep up and adapt by implementing new technology, concepts and ideas, which would lead to the most desirable evolutionary outcome – innovation.

Innovation would, of course, not be possible without information, without being aware of state-of-the-art technological advancements, or without having factual data about what is going on in the current global economic environment. Yet, this knowledge cannot be used unless it is gathered by professionals, and then much like a science, systemised and structured. CI is, therefore, innovative in itself, but it can also lead to further innovation.

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