Competitive intelligence is no longer a young discipline. On turning 18 (counting from the establishment of Motorola’s BI unit by Jan Herring) or 15 (counting from the founding year of SCIP), the competitive intelligence field is well past childhood. So why is it still in an identity crisis? Why do some academics and consultants, members of SCIP’s board, and distinguished Fellowscontinue the debate what makes a CI professional? In other words, are we a true profession or are we still mere fledglings?

The answer is not simple. It is inevitably intertwined with the issue of education, accreditation, and the skill set demanded by the profession. Questions such as “Can we be considered a profession if no academic degree is available?” (Answer: definitely!), “Do we need certification to be recognized as a profession?” (Answer: It certainly helps), and “What makes a successful CI professional?” are at the heart of the matter. Conflicting language and interests between former government “spooks” and the “business” side of the field only add to the confusion. Are we a legitimate business discipline or an extension of political and/or military disciplines?

We, the authors, have faced these questions since the early 1980s. The Academy of Competitive Intelligence, our own institution for the training and education of CI managers and professionals, forces us to confront these issues head on. Our professional CI program is now five years old, and is prospering. We feel it is time to share some of the lessons we’ve learned. We will argue that CI does indeed conform to the definition of a profession; that CI certification, which is now offered by the Academy and by a small number of colleges and universities (and which, in all honesty, is in our self-interest to promote) is one potential route for setting professional standards; and that professional accreditation could, in fact, accelerate the growth of our profession.

**What is a Profession?**

Webster’s dictionary defines a profession as “an occupation requiring advanced education and special training.” By this measure, we are definitely a profession. Most CI professionals have academic degrees in various fields before landing a CI job. Their education in CI goes beyond their existing education, and is, therefore, “advanced.” Furthermore, most CI managers find that their general business background or academic degrees do not sufficiently prepare them for their job. They realize that they need special CI training.

More precisely, there are two basic pre-requisites for a profession:

1. A common body of knowledge shared by all practitioners of this profession.
2. A unique set of tools, or the unique application of those tools.

By Ben Gilad and Jan P. Herring,
THE ACADEMY OF COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE
A Common Body of Knowledge

Is there a “theory of intelligence” that can serve as a common body of knowledge? The answer is yes. A theory is a set of empirical generalizations aimed at explaining facts. Intelligence theory is a set of general principles explaining what intelligence is and what its professionals do. The foundation of the Academy’s curriculum developed by the authors and by Lenny Fuld and Michael Sandman of Fuld & Co., who joined us in creating the first Competitive Intelligence Professional Certificate program (CIPC), assumes that the traditional Intelligence Cycle is the basis for the common knowledge shared by all intelligence professionals. This common body is a reflection of the history of the field emanating from the government side. Historically, it has been used by intelligence organizations in the service of kingdoms, empires, and governments.

The five stages of the Intelligence Cycle are:

1. Needs identification
2. Operational planning
3. Collection and storage
4. Analysis and intelligence production
5. Dissemination of the finished intelligence product

The Intelligence Cycle has been adopted by our profession for business use. For governments and businesses alike, the underlying goal is to enhance organizational planning and decision-making. As with the theory of decision-making (and disciplines of decision-making such as economics and political sciences), the difference between applications—public or private—is where the common body of knowledge is translated into specialized tools and methods. Competitive intelligence may share the basic theory with governmental intelligence, and a subset of tools (applied mainly to collection and dissemination), but it has developed its own set of professional techniques and models (especially for analysis), organizational paradigms and areas of applications, which make it more of a business discipline.

Is There a Unique Set of Tools/Applications?

The issue of a unique set of tools and applications is more complex. Like other interdisciplinary fields, many of the tools used by competitive intelligence professionals were developed elsewhere. Governments and Library/Information Sciences alike have developed many of the collection and monitoring tools we teach at the Academy. Michael Porter, working in the field of strategy, developed competitive analysis, which is used as the basis for our CI analysis module. Scenario planning and business war games, part of our advanced applications module, were developed in the military. However, the CI profession’s uniqueness comes in two areas of application:

1. Applying these tools to specific intelligence topics.
2. Using the tool set and methods as a whole.

In progressive companies, the tools borrowed by CI from many disciplines are used to understand and address the entire spectrum of competitive/business developments (so called Business Intelligence). These are composed of intentions, moves and countermoves by competitors, customers, suppliers, tech-
nology change agents, government regulators and law makers, potential acquirers and acquirees, and so on, operating in the company’s marketplace. The common term we use for them is high impact players (HIPs). The application of the tools and methods to a composite of all HIPs is a task of enormous significance for decision-makers. It provides a synthesis of the various pieces of the competitive set not available from any single entity in the company. In that endeavor, we are unique.

In a more traditional form, the tools are more narrowly applied to the assessment of competitors alone (so called Competitor Intelligence). Here again, our in-depth application of these collection and analysis tools to this specific topic differentiates us from other business specialties.

In each of the five stages of the Intelligence Cycle, business intelligence has evolved its own set of tools and methods, modified and adapted to unique business applications. A few examples are mentioned below.

1. Needs assessment is best accomplished with Herring’s KITS (Key Intelligence Topics).
   While derived from a national security model, the KITS must be adapted to the managerial needs of a business enterprise. What business decisions require intelligence? What are the intelligence inputs required to develop effective business strategies and business plans? What are our competitors likely to do next and why? These are just a few issues to be dealt with at the enterprise level. A new model by Gilad now advanced at the Academy advocates the use of a company’s financial risk profile as one way to determine significant portions of the company’s KITS, in addition to the customary user interviewing method.

2. Planning the intelligence operation and carrying out the actual collection requires a set of ethical and legal guidelines, unique to our profession.
   Trade show “quarterbacking,” for example, is an old method of collection from open sources that has gone through several years of improvements to conform to these guidelines. Human source collection has evolved within the intelligence profession, then migrated to journalism, and has gone through yet additional adaptation to conform to much stricter business intelligence legal guidelines.

3. In computerized collection and storage of secondary source CI, our field certainly did not invent the wheel, but the emergence of unique CI software packages—several of which are reviewed by Fuld’s experts every semester—suggests that general storage applications are not sufficient. Specific CI applications were required. The emergence of intelligent search engines for Internet CI mining is another tool developed for CI use.

4. CI analysis borrows heavily from strategy analysis and market analysis, as well as from economics, finance, statistics, and even psychology.
   All these disciplines help predict the behaviors of High Impact Players or, more narrowly, to understanding competitors’ likely moves. Early warning techniques that apply predictive models for industry evolution, strategic clusters, and competitor blindspot identification are used by CI managers to set up unique “smoke detector” programs.
Blindspot identification techniques are also used to assess strategic options with the least likely competitive resistance, thus reducing the risks involved with major decisions. War gaming tools also have been perfected for assessing competitive responses and improving competitive strategies.

While these business applications are sufficient grounds to set us apart from market research, the CI profession is further differentiated by the use of such tools and methods as a whole. For example, while market researchers use a subset of tools to understand consumers, they do not engage in synthesis of all of the competitive developments on the industry-level, nor do market research quantitative researchers engage in human source collection (HSC) or early warning analysis. Journalists may use HSC techniques, but they do not carry out analysis for specific user needs, i.e., Herring's KITs, or Gilad's "blindspots" identification, and so on. We are the only profession using all of these tools in the performance of our tasks. This holistic view is one reason why we can be defined as a profession requiring special advanced training.

**What Skills Are Needed To Be a CI Professional?**

We have devoted a significant amount of time and intellect to answering this question, as we believe it is the most crucial issue facing CI practitioners.

There are very few examples in the history of business where managers and employees were trusted with new tasks with such minimal training and background to guide them. Yet this is the case with the majority of CI practitioners. The authors have considerable experience in setting up and/or managing CI programs, and we have each brought our own subjective experiences to this article. It was interesting that we agreed rather quickly about the following statement:

"In competitive intelligence, industry knowledge counts far more than educational or professional background."

The reasons are simple. There are three core skills CI professionals must possess:

1. *An ability to collect intelligence from human sources.*
2. *An ability to synthesize (rather than just analyze) disparate industry developments, i.e., see the forest from the trees.*
3. *An ability to derive implications, and identify the most appropriate actions, for one's company or client.*

Though one individual may not necessarily possess all skills, each skill requires intimate industry knowledge, more than a specific academic degree or professional background. Industry knowledge is a prerequisite for developing a wide network of contacts that can serve as collection sources. Industry experience is the prerequisite for discerning relevant from irrelevant developments and identifying specific implications for the company's actions that will lead to a desired outcome.

It is not that the skills identified above require no training. On the contrary, the purpose of the advanced and specialized CI training is exactly to give the practitioner practice in collecting from human sources, analyzing the industry environment for competitive insights, and developing strategic options for management actions. However, industry knowledge is crucial in the ability of practitioners and managers to apply their CI training for their companies' benefit.

The prominent role of accumulated industry knowledge is one reason why any attempt to teach CI as a pure "academic" discipline is doomed. Our experience in academia (Ben Gilad had been a business professor for 18 years teaching CI to BA/MBAs) and in the business world, training novices and experienced managers alike, suggests to us the following: undergraduates with (hypothetically speaking) a BA in "Intelligence Studies," or a young graduate of an MBA program with a specialization in "Intelligence," will be at a disadvantage compared with a seasoned manager with just a few weeks of rigorous training in basic intelligence theory and practices.

The fresh graduate will find it hard to land a good job in CI. Most companies prefer to select a CI analyst from within, after the employee has a few years of industry experience, rather than recruit a CI expert from the outside. The reason is the different shape of the learning curves for intelligence and industry knowledge. It takes longer to master the intricacies of an industry than intelligence's basic principles.

There is also agreement that the CI manager needs managerial skills – communication ability, political astuteness, etc., but practical experience in producing and/or using CI is more important. On personal characteristics, we favor credibility as the most important attribute. One of the authors also favors Chutzpah... All these are secondary though. The most significant component is the insightful understanding of one's industry.

**Training and Accreditation**

Naturally, we are biased in favor of rigorous professional training, which combines theories, tools, and real-world practice. We adopted real case studies, war games, and trade show exercises as our basic instructional methodology. We are careful to permit only very experienced and seasoned professionals to teach for us. But, at the same time, we see training as a privilege, not just a profit-making business. We believe that the future of the profession is being determined right now, and our
role is not only to train, but also to set professional standards and to establish the educational goals for our profession.

The issue of professional standards in education leads inevitably to the question of certification and accreditation. Here we have taken the initiative on two fronts. First, we decided to certify professionals. Then, we decide to certify the certifier, i.e., seek professional accreditation.

We now grant a Competitive Intelligence Professional (CIP) certificate, offered jointly with Fuld & Co. The certificate is granted only after the full course of study is completed—now standing at nine courses—and a proficiency exam is passed. In a field where few hold significant long-term track records, we regard the certificate as a reassurance to companies and their management that their employees have met a minimum set of educational objectives, and developed through our training program the essential knowledge necessary to carry out CI tasks at the professional level.

To certify ourselves, not just the students going through our program, we have applied and received Authorized Provider status from the International Association of Continuing Education and Training (IACET). The IACET accredits such prestigious schools and learning institutions as the American Society for Quality, Bell Leadership, the Center for Professional Advancement, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Council of Education in Management, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, etc.

In going through a rigorous professional accreditation process, we adapted a series of planning, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms, which in essence ensure that we meet the same standards we strive for in teaching CI. As a result of being accredited by IACET, the Academy now grants CEUs (continuing education units), which are recognized by companies and States as a basis for professional development compensation.

It should be crystal clear that in turning to the IACET we have not attempted to say that there is just one way to do CI! Like the professions of strategists or marketers, our profession does not require a standard skill set or a rigid adherence to specific procedures and practices (such as accountants or lawyers). However, our action is intended to make a statement that professional training should be professional:

- It should be more than a random collection of seminars.
- It should teach from a common body of knowledge.
- Advanced courses should build on core ones.
- It should strive to provide a relevant experience for students that will prepare them for the real CI world they will operate in.

The accreditation process ensures that students receive professional training according to professional standards developed across many fields. The result, we hope, will be a wider acceptance of the profession, as a profession, among the companies and executives we serve.

Dr. Ben Gilad, co-founder and president of the Academy of Competitive Intelligence (www.gilad-herringACI.com) and former associate professor at Rutgers University, received SCIP’s Meritorious Award in 1996 for his contribution to the development of the CI profession. Since 1983, he has helped companies throughout the world build up their intelligence capabilities. His corporate model for CI activities, detailed in his (sold out) book, The Business Intelligence System, (Amacom, co-authored with Tamar Gilad), is a widely adopted model among Fortune 500 companies. His second book, Business Blindspots, is now in its third printing (Infonortics-UK). His most recent book is a two-volume collection titled The Art and Science of Business Intelligence Analysis (JAI Press), which he co-edited with Jan Herring. His seminar on building an intelligence organization, offered by SCIP for seven years straight, is consistently one of the Society’s highest-rated programs. The Academy of Competitive Intelligence’s joint public training program with Fuld & Co. is recognized among the leading CI training programs in the world today, and has trained a majority of Fortune 500 CI managers. Dr. Gilad shares his time between the US and Caesarea, Israel. He may be reached by e-mail at bgilad@netvision.net.il.

Jan P. Herring has worked for over 35 years in the intelligence field, first as an intelligence officer at the CIA and later as the director of Motorola’s intelligence program. At Motorola, his pioneering efforts resulted in the creation of the firm’s highly acclaimed Business Intelligence system—based on national security principles—that is today recognized by many as the most advanced operation of its kind. Now the president of Herring & Associates, Mr. Herring helps companies design, develop, and operate their own competitive intelligence systems as well as improve their existing intelligence operations. He is the author of Measuring the Effectiveness of Competitive Intelligence: Assessing & Communicating CI’s Value to Your Organization (SCIP Publications). Mr. Herring is a founding member of the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals and in 1993 was awarded the Society’s highest honor—the Meritorious Award for Excellence in Competitive Intelligence—in recognition of his contributions to the CI profession and to SCIP. His firm is located at 1338 Asylum Ave., Hartford, CT 06105 USA; tel: +1 860-232-9080; fax: +1 860-232-4420.