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## Exploring competitive intelligence in Romania: understanding corporate views and approaches

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### Abstract

The awareness and application of Competitive Intelligence (CI) in Romania are significantly less developed than in international markets. This disparity is evident in the limited understanding of CI methodologies and the insufficient allocation of resources dedicated to fostering a CI-oriented culture within Romanian enterprises. Furthermore, the perspectives of market participants on the importance and use of CI have not been thoroughly examined, highlighting a considerable gap in systematic research on this topic.

This study aims to address this gap in the existing literature by exploring the perceptions of Romanian firms regarding CI-related activities. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research seeks to assess how organizations recognize the benefits of CI, the extent to which these practices are integrated into their decision-making frameworks, and the obstacles that hinder their implementation. By doing so, this study enhances the understanding of CI within the Romanian context and establishes a foundational framework for promoting and advancing CI practices in the local economic landscape.

### Keywords:

competitive intelligence; Romania; companies; perception.

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## Competitive intelligence - conceptualization

While for intelligence services, information is the key to national security, helping them to perform or maintain a level of security, for private companies - whatever their sector - information means profit and success against competitors. Competitiveness is making firms increasingly preoccupied with collecting and using information, and the process itself is becoming more sophisticated. Societies have a pressing need not only to possess information but above all to select it and transform it into knowledge to support decision-making. "Knowing the right things at the right time and acting on them is essential to achieving success." (Cook and Cook 2000) The focus therefore falls not only on raw information, but it is also relevant from the perspective of usefulness, with the timing of obtaining it being as important as the information itself. It is in this context that a particularly important concept for business - competitive intelligence - is emerging and developing.

Competitive intelligence (CI) is defined as any combination of data, information, and knowledge concerning the business environment in which a company operates that, when processed, provides a significant competitive advantage or enables informed decisions to be made based on sound analysis of all relevant factors and available options (Larry 1996, 16). Another definition emphasizes that Competitive Intelligence is "the process by which companies inform themselves about all aspects of rivals' activity and performance. It is an essential element in which the planning, not only of marketing campaigns but also of competitors' production programs, human resources, financial and other activities, can be directly or indirectly influential" (Larry 1996)

This field is one that emerged as a result of the realization of needs or shortcomings in management activity, being scientifically and methodologically transposed into research later. It therefore does not emerge from academic reflections, but rather from observations and business needs. The role of economic intelligence is obviously important throughout history, but we can approach this component of the business environment from the second half of the 20th century. Some of the first scholarly works in this area appeared in the United States. One of the earliest works dealing comprehensively and systematically with the process of competitive intelligence appeared in the United States of America and belongs to Michael Porter. Published in 1980, the book *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors* was addressed to economic actors and aimed to solve a problem identified in the way management decision-making takes place. The work also presents a number of general techniques for analyzing the competitive environment and proposes models for setting strategies (Porter 1980).

In today's world, anticipating the rapid changes and transformations occurring in markets or different industries is a challenge that company leaders are finding increasingly difficult to manage. Based on given situations, the formulation of

strategies (short-term, medium and long-term) is an important step on which the very survival of the company depends. CI analysis involves a vast process by which the identified information is sorted according to its usefulness, evaluated, analysed and finally entrusted to decision-makers in the form of a complex analysis aimed at gaining a competitive advantage. The essential goal of every manager is to make a profit (or as much profit as possible), and this is one of the main economic indicators of whether the chosen strategies are favourable. It is important to emphasize here that the impact of a CI analysis is not immediate and cannot be immediately seen in the increase in the company's profit. From the perspective of improving product quality, CI processes bring a multitude of benefits through the innovation they bring to companies as well as to the sectors and areas in which they operate. Competitive intelligence involves two lines of work: one inward (the internal environment of the company) and one outward. While the former is aimed at an in-depth analysis of each individual department, with work structures, processes and organizational charts, the latter is aimed at a fundamental knowledge of the competition ([Cook and Cook 2000](#)).

All companies, regardless of their size, need Competitive Intelligence. As long as the concept of competition exists, competitive analysis is necessary. Technology and the ability of consumers to shop online is transforming competition, internationalizing it, irrespective of the size of the company. In order to stay in a market or to be successful, small businesses need to be aware of their competitors, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and what their existing or future strategies are.

In Romania, the level of knowledge and use of the concept of Competitive Intelligence (CI) is still underdeveloped compared to other international markets. The lack of consolidated knowledge and practices around CI, together with the limited resources allocated to this field, contribute to a low integration of intelligence practices in the strategies of local companies. At the same time, the perception of economic agents in the market towards the importance and usefulness of CI remains insufficiently known, as there are few studies or research that systematically explore how economic actors relate to this strategic process. Our study aims to fill this gap in the literature by initiating a structured analysis of the perceptions of Romanian companies regarding the use of specific Competitive Intelligence (CI) activities. Using a qualitative method, the research aims to explore to what extent the Romanian organizations are aware of the benefits of CI, how they integrate these practices in their decision-making processes and what barriers they perceive in their adoption. Thus, our approach contributes not only to a deeper understanding of the subject but also to the creation of a useful reference framework for the development and promotion of CI in the Romanian economic context.

In the following, we will outline the design of the research, as well as the main findings resulting from the interviews conducted with representatives of Romanian companies.

## Research design

Based on the aforementioned assumptions, this paper uses the qualitative research method based on the semi-structured interview, a method that will help us to understand how Romanian companies relate to the practice of competitive intelligence.

The field of competitive intelligence combines elements from the fields of intelligence and economic studies. The point of congruence of the two fields is the uncertainty that can only be erased from the decision-making process by means of information.

### *Case selection*

Our study aims at the perception of economic agents in Romania regarding the concept of competitive intelligence. We therefore propose an analysis of the Romanian economic environment, based on the perceptions of economic actors, their vision and their ways of resisting and developing. What is important for us is the attention these economic agents pay to the competitive environment and the strategies they use in this direction. In other words, we try to explore the causal mechanisms at work in a general relationship (Jason 2008). In this respect, we will use the single-case method, the case of Romania.

The Atlas of Economic Complexity, a tool for research and exploration of global trade flows in international markets, developed by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government following research conducted by the Harvard Growth Lab, ranks Romania 44th (out of 133) among the world's richest economies, with a 3.9% growth over the last five years. It is estimated that our country presents a dynamic and complex economic environment, with real possibilities for growth and development in the coming years, considering that the post-communist transition period from a centralized economy to a free trade economy is completed (Growth Lab n.d.). There are also a number of particularities of the Romanian economy which differentiate it from the other states of the European Union: the most interesting for our study is the fact that the level of competitiveness and performance indicators is below the European average (Valentin 2017). A democratic state for 34 years, a member of NATO for 19 years and a member of the European Union for 17 years, Romania is a young capitalist country. It is necessary to analyse the economic environment, through the prism of the actors/companies that operate within it, studying, interpreting and analysing their perceptions, the reasoning based on which they carry out their activity and also their own methods of interpreting the complexity of the economic environment within which they operate and develop.

### *Data collection method*

In our opinion, a qualitative analysis of the business environment in Romania, from the point of view of information and competition, can be most comprehensively done with the semi-structured interview. The polyvalent nature of the relationship between the economy and intelligence is difficult to quantify through statistical methods, which motivated the choice of the interview. This facilitates a structured

dialogue with questions and answers aimed at revealing the companies' views on the field of competitive intelligence.

The semi-structured interview gives us flexibility and the possibility to adapt the questions according to the answers given by the interviewee. The interaction will be personalized, open-ended, and timely to explore a topic about which there is not much data available. This environment will give us much more insight into the perceptions of companies and allow us to explore topics that we had not initially considered.

From the perspective of the sample, since it is impossible to survey the entire population in an analysis, a representative sample is established, and interviewing them leads to results that can then be generalized ([Kalika, Mouricou and Garreaun 2009](#)). The selection of respondents was based on diversity, so the discussions were held with representatives of companies from vast areas and fields of activity, which are active (but not only) in the Romanian market. As the field of business intelligence is not easily accessible to all, large companies with a turnover (in the last three years) of more than one million lei were selected. Although the number of companies contacted for the interview was considerably higher, in the end, the number of responses was 23.

The discussions were conducted: face-to-face – with eight respondents (35%), via video computer applications - with eleven respondents (48%) and by telephone – with four respondents (17%). The period of the interviews was approximately 10 months, from August 2022 to May 2023, and the average duration of a meeting was 30 minutes. Out of the total of 23 respondents, 19 requested to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) which required the interviewer to maintain the confidentiality of the discussion itself and the data and information provided. This was requested even though each respondent was assured of anonymity and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) regulations and that the purpose of this research was purely academic and scientific.

In terms of content, the interview grid consists of three parts: the first part, in which data about the company in question are obtained, the level of understanding of the subject of CI, perceptions on the importance of information in the business environment; the second part – to which those who state that they undertake CI actions respond; and the third part – to which those who state that they do not undertake CI actions respond.

### ***Respondents' profile***

The respondents in our study represent people from the management of companies that were chosen based on several criteria. Thus, the following criteria were used in the selection of respondents: turnover, number of employees and company affiliation (Romanian company/multinational company). Turnover is relevant, first of all, as it indicates the total sales, and the total business operations, in fact, realized by a company in a given period (usually one year). It highlights the very conduct of a company's business, establishing the total sales (and total revenues) made. Going further, according to Law 346 of July 14, 2004, on stimulating the creation and

development of small and medium-sized enterprises, turnover classifies companies into (a) small and medium-sized enterprises (number of employees less than 250 and net turnover up to €50 million) which in turn are divided into -micro-enterprises (up to 9 employees and turnover up to €2 million), - small enterprises (10 to 49 employees and turnover up to €10 million) and medium-sized enterprises (50 to 249 employees and turnover up to €50 million). The second broad category is large companies and corporations (more than 250 employees and turnover of over €50 million). Based on these legislative elements, the profile of respondents is as follows:

**TABLE NO. 1**

**Classification of respondents**

| Company type             | Number of respondents |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Corporations             | 5                     |
| Medium-sized enterprises | 8                     |
| Small enterprises        | 8                     |
| Micro-enterprises        | 2                     |

An overview of respondents can be found in the box below:

**TABLE NO. 2**

**Respondents' profile**

| Assigned code | NACE Code*   | Turnover**      | Number of employees*** | Multinational company | Romanian company |
|---------------|--|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| C 1           | 6419 – Other monetary intermediations  | 6 billion lei   | 5,000                  | Yes                   |                  |
| C 2           | 4646 – Wholesale of pharmaceutical goods   | 3 billion lei   | 700                    | Yes                   |                  |
| C 3           | 4120 – Construction of residential and non-residential buildings                           | 20 million lei  | 45                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 4           | 4120 – Construction of residential and non-residential buildings                           | 20 million lei  | 20                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 5           | 7311 – Advertising agencies  | 90 million lei  | 40                     | Yes                   |                  |
| C 6           | 7022 – Business and other management consultancy activities                                | 2.5 million lei | 10                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 7           | 7022 – Business and other management consultancy activities                                | 1 million lei   | 5                      |                       | Yes              |
| C 8           | 4520 – Maintenance and repair of motor vehicles  | 50 million lei  | 50                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 9           | 6201 – Computer programming activities   | 200 million lei | 600                    | Yes                   |                  |
| C 10          | 6201 – Computer programming activities   | 180 million lei | 600                    | Yes                   |                  |
| C 11          | 6201 – Computer programming activities   | 170 million lei | 500                    | Yes                   |                  |
| C 12          | 9200 – Gambling and betting activities   | 90 million lei  | 50                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 13          | 4711 – Retail sale in non-specialised stores with food, beverages or tobacco predominating | 130 million lei | 200                    |                       | Yes              |
| C 14          | 4764 – Retail sale of sporting equipment in specialised stores                             | 350 million lei | 80                     | Yes                   |                  |
| C 15          | 4791 – Retail sale via mail order houses or Internet                                       | 25 million lei  | 15                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 16          | 8559 – Other education n.e.c.  | 10 million lei  | 50                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 17          | 8559 – Other education n.e.c.  | 5 million lei   | 10                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 18          | 0150 – Mixed farming   | 180 million lei | 120                    |                       | Yes              |
| C 19          | 0147 – Raising of poultry  | 150 million lei | 600                    |                       | Yes              |
| C 20          | 0121 – Growing of grapes   | 150 million lei | 100                    |                       | Yes              |
| C 21          | 6920 – Accounting, bookkeeping and auditing activities; tax consultancy                    | 10 million lei  | 10                     |                       | Yes              |
| C 22          | 6492 – Other credit granting   | 33 million lei  | 100                    |                       | Yes              |
| C23           | 2351 – Manufacture of cement   | 2 billion lei   | 1,000                  | Yes                   |                  |

### ***Data analysis method***

Our study uses inductive thematic analysis as a method of data analysis, which focuses on understanding and interpreting practices and experiences rather than measuring variables using mathematical processes. Based on the theoretical concepts studied, we considered that inductive thematic analysis harmonizes best with the study of the perception and understanding of Romanian companies in the field of Competitive Intelligence. Moreover, it allows an intrinsic approach to finding out the motivation behind the decision and the way companies choose to undertake CI actions. Thus, as a result of the interviews conducted, large recurring themes were identified, which we will discuss in the following section.

## **Analysis**

This paper gives an epistemological approach to the field of Competitive Intelligence in Romania. Based on the research carried out, it is evident that the domain is insufficiently studied in our country, and what is more, it is insufficiently known and understood by the private sector.

Competitiveness is not exclusively a private sector concern but encompasses national and European policy interests. These structures are willing to pay increased attention and involvement in this direction, considering competitiveness a *sine qua non-principle* of sustainable economic development. According to the European Commission, competitiveness is particularly important “as it reflects the sustained increase in a nation’s standard of living”. ([European Commission 2023](#)). Mișu Negrițoiu, President of the Financial Supervisory Authority (ASF), stated at a conference of the NBR: “Competitiveness is created mainly at the microeconomic level; sustainable prosperity is created by firms in a favourable macroeconomic environment, and the factors that determine the level of productivity are: investment, the ability to innovate and competition.” These three aspects mentioned are particularly important in a developed market economy; in our paper, we will address the third one through the prism of Competitive Intelligence.

### ***Level of understanding of competitive intelligence***

Literature offers a number of complex definitions and approaches to the CI domain, but this paper explores how the respondents, i.e., the companies interviewed, perceive it.

From the total of 23 interviewees, 8 (C3, C4, C8, C12, C13, C15, C16, C22), (34.8%), state that they have never heard, therefore not knowing the concept of IC, resulting in 65.2% of those who have encountered this concept during their work. During the discussions, those who say that they are not familiar with the concept try to clarify themselves, to get more details or even try, in the form of questions, to clarify the concept: “Does it refer to espionage?” or “Is it a new field brought in by some foreign business?”. On the other side, there is the category of respondents who say that they have encountered the concept in the course of their work. Those who can define it

capture the following aspects, which are also correct: analysing information about competitors, collecting and analysing existing data on the market, protecting their own sensitive data, and improving performance: “Competitive Intelligence (CI) is the process of collecting and using relevant information about competitors – customers, suppliers. It helps us better understand the business environment” (C2). In category number three, there are those respondents who state that they are familiar with the concept of CI but when asked to define it do so incorrectly. A frequently encountered element is that competitive intelligence is still confused with espionage and intelligence service activity: ‘It has to do with intelligence services and companies spying on each other’ (C20). This is due to the suspicion surrounding the intelligence field in Romania. Communication of intelligence institutions with the public has failed to clarify the difference between espionage (e.g., industrial) and competitive intelligence which remains a poorly addressed area.

We tried to find out whether respondents have any knowledge about companies using CI, in Romania or abroad, and which exactly they are. 12 respondents said that they were aware of such companies, but were not certain, which is why we were not given the names of any such companies. Similarly, in trying to find out whether respondents were aware of companies in their field of activity that use CI, we received 7 affirmative answers. Asked further if they could tell us which they were, they chose to answer vaguely. Interestingly, this category of respondents is also aware of training courses in this field and of companies that offer CI consultancy. We noticed that all the mentioned consultancy companies are from outside Romania, and none of them are local. Respondents mentioned the lack of Romanian companies in this field and attributed it to the insufficient development of it in our country. In addition, some of them even mentioned the fact that there is no culture in this field.

#### ***Perceived importance of information***

Not surprisingly, the saying “information is power” seems to be internalized by all respondents to our interview. Asked about the importance they attach to information, the respondents unanimously replied that they consider themselves to be up to date with market dynamics and the competitive environment in which they operate - “in our field of activity, anyone who is not up to date with the latest information, the latest technologies, will not survive in the market” (C4). The value they attach to the information they hold is also underlined by the fact that all respondents mention the importance they attach to data/information protection. Whatever the field of activity, they are all concerned that data about their companies, recipes, and patents should not be made public (“We have valuable production recipes that we protect, which are secret” (C7)). Also, in this category, the confusion between information obtained from open sources, in a legal way, and espionage is maintained. One respondent even tells us - “we don’t deal with that [CI] because espionage is illegal and we don’t want to get into trouble”. In other words, as mentioned above, many interviewees associate connotations of espionage with this totally legal practice, confusing the two concepts, or failing to see any noticeable difference between them.



### *Companies undertaking competitive intelligence actions*

One of the major themes we addressed, according to which we split the respondents and structured the interviews, is the one that results in two kinds of approaches: companies that undertake and companies that do not undertake CI activities.

In the first category, we find 7 companies out of the total of 23 interviewed (30.4%), namely: C1, C2, C5, C9, C10, C11, and C23. In the table below we can observe the profile of the respondents-companies carrying out CI activities.

**TABLE NO. 3**

**Profile of companies carrying out CI activities**

| Company | Turnover (average) | Number of employees (average) | Company type               |
|---------|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| C1      | 6 billion lei      | 5,000                         | Large company/corporation  |
| C2      | 3 billion lei      | 700                           | Large company/ corporation |
| C5      | 90 million lei     | 40                            | Medium-sized enterprise    |
| C9      | 200 million lei    | 600                           | Medium-sized enterprise    |
| C10     | 180 million lei    | 600                           | Large company/corporation  |
| C11     | 170 million lei    | 500                           | Large company/corporation  |
| C23     | 2 billion lei      | 1,000                         | Large company/corporation  |

As we can see, the profile of the companies undertaking CI actions is large companies, with a turnover of more than 18 million euros, most of them corporations (i.e., turnover of more than 50 million euros and more than 250 employees). In fact, out of the total of 7 companies, 5 are large companies/corporations and only 2 are medium-sized companies (turnover of more than 10 million euro and more than 50 employees). Of these, most have started their activities specific to the field of the study from the moment they started their activity in Romania. Of course, one of the reasons for this is that all of these companies have an old, tested organizational structure that did not have its roots in Romania.

A few of the companies (2) that have subsequently introduced the CI component into their business believe that there are noticeable differences in what it means to improve the company's business. This is reinforced by aspects related to (1) the importance of anticipating surprises - „we are much more aware of the reasons for the competition's decisions, they are no longer surprises”, (2) the need to innovate - „we launched new products on the Romanian market, which did not exist before, by studying foreign companies” or (3) carrying out pragmatic, profitable activities - „because we understand the market better, we negotiate better with suppliers, obtaining advantages”.

We were interested in finding out whether these companies have in-house CI departments/structures or if they outsource these activities. 5 (71.4%) of them have outsourced the CI area, in the sense that specialized companies in the field are in charge of it. No names of such companies were disclosed, 4 of the respondents only mentioning that they are not Romanian companies. One of the respondents stated that they have created their own CI department within the company, and another respondent stated that, although they currently have their own employees doing CI, at the beginning of the activity they collaborated with a specialized company from abroad (the motivation being a financial one).

Concerning the level of awareness of employees within the company about the CI efforts: all interviewees state that the vast majority of employees are not aware that the company where they work is engaged in CI activities. Only stakeholders, decision makers, top, and macro management are aware. As to the reason behind this decision, the answers are diverse, but have a common theme: „They don't need to know, we don't want it to be openly known in the market that we are doing this". On the one hand, companies want to protect their data, on the other hand, there is the fear of confusion that could arise among employees, most of whom are not aware of references in the field of business intelligence: („the data that we get through CI is very valuable, if this were found out it is possible that the process of obtaining it would be hindered, and in this sense, the large number of employees is a vulnerability" – C1).

As regards the usefulness of the information obtained with the help of the CI, all those with whom we spoke concluded that the data/reports obtained are particularly important. However, the way of working seems to be different for each company. Thus, we found the following situations: reports are requested whenever necessary (acquisitions, mergers, etc.) – C5, annual reports are received, containing analysis and forecasts for the following year/years – C2 or the CI department requests business meetings whenever they consider it necessary – C10. These reports and analyses seem to be useful in several situations listed by the respondents: profitability, sales growth, company credibility, cash flow, relationship with suppliers, rate of return on investment, company image, customer relations, market value, human resources, market share, turnover, adaptation/discovery of new technologies.

The discussions also led in the direction of analysing the future of the CI field in Romania, as it is seen by companies that are concerned with and concerned about this issue. We note that 71.4% of respondents believe that the CI field will develop in Romania. They attribute this to technological developments and the increasing openness of the Romanian market. Technologies such as AI (Artificial Intelligence) would bring new benefits in the field of business information but could also represent dangers for companies that do not understand, are not up to date with these technologies, or are unable to adapt. The development of the business consulting field in Romania could also bring about developments in CI activities.

Two respondents state that they do not foresee a development of the CI field in Romania. They put this down, on the one hand, to the financial resources needed by a company to undertake CI actions, which are more difficult for small companies to obtain. On the other hand, they consider that the (still) post-communist Romanian society is reluctant to easily accept terms such as intelligence, information, and counter-information, and tends to associate them with espionage and illegal actions. An education on the security culture would be necessary in this respect, all the more so as this area is not regulated by law in Romania.

### ***Companies not undertaking competitive intelligence actions***

The majority of the company representatives with whom we had dialogue stated that they do not undertake CI actions. The profile of the respondents who stated this can be analysed in Table 4.

**TABLE NO. 4**  
**Profile of companies not performing CI activities**

| <b>Assigned code</b> | <b>Turnover (average)</b> | <b>Number of employees (average)</b> | <b>Company type</b>     |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| C 3                  | 20 million lei            | 45                                   | Small business          |
| C 4                  | 20 million lei            | 20                                   | Small business          |
| C 6                  | 2.5 million lei           | 10                                   | Microenterprise         |
| C 7                  | 1 million lei             | 5                                    | Microenterprise         |
| C 8                  | 50 million lei            | 50                                   | Small business          |
| C 12                 | 90 million lei            | 50                                   | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 13                 | 130 million lei           | 200                                  | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 14                 | 350 million lei           | 80                                   | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 15                 | 25 million lei            | 15                                   | Small business          |
| C 16                 | 10 million lei            | 50                                   | Small business          |
| C 17                 | 5 million lei             | 10                                   | Small business          |
| C 18                 | 180 million lei           | 120                                  | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 19                 | 150 million lei           | 600                                  | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 20                 | 150 million lei           | 100                                  | Medium-sized enterprise |
| C 21                 | 10 million lei            | 10                                   | Small business          |
| C 22                 | 33 million lei            | 100                                  | Small business          |

Out of a total of 16 interviewees who stated that they do not carry out CI actions, 2 (12.5%) are micro-enterprises, 8 (50%) are small enterprises and 6 (37.5%) are medium-sized enterprises. Their turnover is in the range of 1 million euro - 120 million euro and their number of employees is between 5 and 600. We note that there are no corporations in this category, as all those who agreed to be interviewed stated that they carry out CI operations.

The discussions held with representatives of these companies were different from those held with representatives of companies claiming to carry out CI activities, seeking to elicit the motivations and rationale behind the decision.

First of all, out of all the respondents (16) who stated that the companies they represent do not initiate CI actions, 37.5% justify the decision on the grounds of high costs („we are a small company, we cannot afford to invest in such a thing for the time being” – C6). However, only 3 respondents state that they are aware of companies that offer specialized courses and are aware of or have received pricing offers; the other 3 say that they are not aware of the prices charged by consulting or training firms in this field, they only assume that the prices charged would be high („I have never asked how much it costs because our budget does not allow us to offer courses or to hire more staff at the moment” – C20). This is important because it reveals that an important decision such as this one is based on assumptions, without any verification.

Another argument is of a moral, ethical nature. These refer, in fact, to the confusion made between CI (and business intelligence) and espionage. By equating the two

terms, even confusing them, the respondents state that the ethical values implemented in their companies do not allow them to deal with such actions („espionage is illegal, such practices would discredit us” – C12) and therefore are irrelevant for them („our company puts a very high emphasis on moral and ethical values, and we do not concern ourselves with approaches that do not fit into these values” – C18). Moreover, they even state that they would not trust companies that would carry out CI practices, but at the same time claim that they do not know such companies.

A recurrent motivation found during the discussions is based on a lack of knowledge of the CI domain. Thus, they do not start CI operations because they do not understand what it entails („I don't know how we could find out details about the competition, where we would find this information” – C15), who and what they should do in the company („the marketing department studies the competition and finds out what they promote” – C4). In this sense, 31.25% of those asked, do not deal with the field of business intelligence, or with the field of studying the competition because they do not know details about how they should do this.

For many respondents, one explanation for the lack of activity in this area is the lack of human resources. They claim that it would be useful for their companies to have some people/employees dealing with CI, but they do not know how and where they could find qualified staff. They consider that this area would not lend itself to being outsourced to a third-party company, but should be tackled by their own employees with skills in the field. There is support for the idea that if there was a ‚school’ in this sector, producing accredited specialists, then it would be easier for companies to work in this area. Also, respondents do not see the usefulness of courses in the field for their own employees to do but would need “professionals” (“I don't trust fast-track professional qualification courses, especially in such a complex field.” – C3); companies would find it easier to hire professionals in the field than to train their own specialists. In other words, these respondents do not consider an investment in training/retraining courses useful, preferring to hire professionals for each department/position and see specialization courses rather as bonuses that could be offered to employees. On the other hand, they do not object if employees want to take these courses and pay for them themselves.

### **Research limitations**

The research that we have carried out has been challenging in many ways and this has an effect on the research findings. Based on interpretations from the data obtained, the research focuses on establishing perceptions, opinions or motivations present behind certain actions, and analysing decisions in depth. It establishes the relationship of economic agents to the field of Competitive Intelligence, their own visions and perceptions of the phenomenon; however, it is not without limitations. The aim was, more than obtaining some information, to understand the motivations

behind some behaviours, attitudes and phenomena in the Romanian business environment.

One of the limitations of the research is due to non-probability sampling, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings of the study to the whole country. On the other hand, the task of finding companies willing to provide information was difficult. Their reluctance can be justified by the fact that in a competitive environment, companies tend to protect their data from being made public and not to be known by competitors.

The interview can go into the depth of a complex topic, but subjects may be unwittingly influenced by the interviewer (even if the interviewer is neutral) or may give distorted information. Their behaviour may be dissimulative, and the interviewer may not notice this, which can make the information pervasive, distorted, or incomplete. During the interviews, we paid particular attention to these aspects but the limitation here exists. Another limitation is represented by the novelty of the field of Competitive Intelligence in Romania. On the one hand, this aspect creates confusion among companies about CI, as it is little known and understood.

As this is a sensitive issue for the subjects and the companies they represent, confidentiality and the protection of their identity are particularly important, both ethically and legally. Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is a difficult issue to coordinate.

## Conclusions

Our survey reveals that all respondents believe that information is important in business, although not all are actively and systematically concerned with obtaining it. Similarly, they all consider it important to study competition, although they choose not to do so, or not in a systematic and scientific way. The companies we spoke to know little about training opportunities in this area or about companies that can advise them.

An important recurring issue in the course of this research is the confusion between CI and espionage. On the one hand, this can be understandable, as there is not a sufficiently developed business intelligence culture in our country, the capitalist economy here being still quite new. On the other hand, the term intelligence, which is specific to the intelligence services, may be more difficult to transpose into the private sector in such a way that its meaning changes. Clearly, the CI works with open sources, but even this concept can pose problems of understanding for a layman/non-specialist. The association with espionage is also found among some who claim to know or have encountered the concept of CI, which shows that it is easy to be confused or that those who use it are not specialists or have not been informed by specialized, credible sources. In this paper, we have addressed a detailed

explanation of the differences between these two concepts, and we believe that it is useful to promote CI by mentioning precisely those aspects that distinguish and separate it from espionage.

Out of the total number of respondents, seven stated that they carry out CI activities (about 30%), and their profiles are of large, multinational companies. They claim that they have been carrying out IC operations since they first entered the Romanian market, which leads us to the conclusion that this practice is common and that multinational companies are aware of and use this area. This creates a disadvantage for Romanian companies which, for the most part, do not undertake such actions, do not attach so much importance to the competitive environment or, even more, are not aware that other firms do so. Thus, a large company knows in detail a market or the competition existing there, while a small company does not benefit from this advantage.

Those who undertake CI actions are fully satisfied and can state the benefits they bring to their companies. However, they prefer to keep this information hidden, not only from the public eye but also from their own employees. In terms of where CI activities take place, the vast majority of respondents use the services of external companies. We can deduce that these firms are not Romanian, due to the fact that the respondents, when asked, could only give examples of consultancy firms outside the country. Of those who have their own CI departments, one said that it is relatively newly built, as they were initially working with a consultancy firm. The difficulty in finding specialists in this field was again a recurring issue. There is a shortage of qualified personnel in the field of business intelligence in Romania, hence the preference to select foreign companies for collaboration from countries with a longer tradition in this field.

The micro and small companies interviewed state that they do not carry out CI actions, as do the vast majority of medium-sized companies. As mentioned above, we observe that this is rather a concern of large companies, which are also extended beyond the country's borders. The perception of smaller companies is that either CI requires the allocation of large sums of money or that it is not suitable for small companies and therefore would not be useful enough to justify the financial effort.

Although this significant allocation of money is discussed, it is rather a supposition, because the interviewees do not know the details of how much a course, expertise or collaboration with specialized companies would cost. Being a less well-known, rather new field, there is an assumption that expertise or consultancy would entail high costs. However, as companies are not aware of these costs, it is not possible to assess whether the benefits would outweigh them or what the cost/benefit ratio would be.

However, the vast majority of company representatives who say they do not carry out CI activities do not rule out this possibility. They are either open to this way of working, saying that they might do so in the future, or they are still sceptical about

the ability to allocate budget funds in this direction. The level of scepticism is high, mainly because the perception is that financial needs would be increased.

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