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Using International Human Resource Management to Inform the Business Intelligence Function

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There has probably never been a time when the advice from professional and scholarly business pundits has been so plentiful, varied, and outright contradictory. Companies and managers are being told, among other things, that re-engineering (Hammer and Champy, 1993), right-sizing (Marshall and Yorks, 1994), and, even, supernatural interventions (Unruh, 1994) are the keys to business success in this day and age.

Interestingly, one strategy that is even more perplexing, since it seems to clash with conventional wisdom and common sense, exhorts companies to "collaborate with their competitors to win." (Carlin, Dowling, Roering, Wyman, Kalinoglou, and Clyburn, 1994; Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad, 1989; Ohmae, 1989). To the casual observer, it seems as if these so-called "strategic alliances" are being consummated in every corner of the world.

On the other hand, in an unassuming but diligent and measured manner, some multinational companies are treating business less like a form of polygamy and more like war. Proctor & Gamble, Microsoft, and Frito-Lay come to mind. With ever increasing vigor, these organizations are methodically monitoring and investigating their competitors and deploying all the resources they have at their disposal to vanquish these current or future foes, be they domestic or international competitors (Ghoshal and Kim, 1986).

Surprisingly, many companies that are targeted by their adversaries, particularly U.S. ones, seem to be oblivious to the fact that they are being scrutinized, indeed attacked, in such an aggressive and systematic manner (McDermott, 1994; Eftimiades, 1994). To say the least, were this to be widely known, it would surely be disconcerting to many stakeholders, including employees and owners.

Indeed, it appears that most large American firms adopt an "ivory tower" approach when it comes to this issue (Mintzberg, 1994). Unlike multinationals elsewhere in the world, especially those from Europe and Asia, who are known to systematically leverage the eyes, ears, and intelligence of their employees and their executives (Hannon, and Sano, 1995), American companies have traditionally relied either on salespeople or an elite group of graduate business school strategy types (Mellow, 1989) to collect, analyze, and distribute business intelligence information. In spite of this more 'professional' approach, Mellow (1989), among others, argues that efforts and results in this arena have "failed to meet expectations." Indeed, some scholars now disdainfully argue that these days, professional business strategists are preoccupied with strategic programming rather than strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994).

Some companies, however, *have* made business intelligence gathering and evaluation important parts of their strategies and operations (Boettcher and Welge, 1994). Likewise, some countries *have* made business intelligence a priority (Eftimiades, 1994).

The unresolved question is, why have so many companies and countries not adopted this approach? The purpose of this study, one of the first of its kind, is to rigorously examine the associations between international human resource management (IHRM) and acquiring and using business intelligence.

It is apparent that many executives, managers, and scholars have not considered how IHRM policies and practices can profoundly influence business intelligence activities. So, this paper will examine the link between BI and HR from the perspectives of Chief HR Officers in 50 US multinational corporations. First, the concept of business intelligence will be introduced and briefly outlined. Next, the results from a survey of these HR executives on the topics of International HRM and BI will be presented. Finally, the results of this study and their implications for researchers and practitioners will be discussed.

BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

For the purpose of this paper, business intelligence will be defined as the acquisition, analysis, and distribution of information pertaining to (1) a company's resources and capabilities, (2) the current and potential resources and capabilities of its competitors, or (3) the external business environment in which the company operates--in other words, the impact of customers, regulations, industries, cultures, and other forces that shape its current and future market opportunities (Ghoshal and Westney, 1991).

Within reason, intelligence activities can theoretically be performed by any person or department in the organization. (Ghoshal and Kim, 1986). Traditional business intelligence activities, unlike acts of corporate espionage, include obtaining publicly disseminated or publicly accessible information (like analyzing annual reports and 10K reports) and engaging in routine transactions in open product markets (such as buying and testing a competitor's newest product). These activities are generally viewed as being both legal and ethical (Sammon, Kurland, and Spitalnic, 1984). In fact, it has been reported that "many corporate intelligence specialists insist that 99% of the most useful competitive information about any company is available through perfectly legal means." (McDermott, 1994, p. 32).

On the other hand, driven by the heightened global competition that prevails now, some companies and countries have even resorted to "cloak and dagger" and "spy vs. spy" types of covert activities to obtain information about their economic adversaries (McDermott, 1994) these days. In doing so, they sometimes stretch the limits of ethics and legality by engaging in certain activities and methods normally reserved for nations at war (Sammon, Kurland, and Spitalnic, 1984; Hallaq and Steinhorst, 1994).

No matter how ethically or formally the competition will be monitored, it is imperative for firms to identify those competitors who merit surveillance and determine if there are appropriate information sources for finding out more about these

adversaries. In general, sources for intelligence information include published materials, such as patent filings and financial reports, as well as employees; specifically, employees who have had some interaction with these competitors.

To be sure, it is now widely acknowledged (not just by the allegedly 'privileged' experts who typically bear responsibility for it) that intelligence plays a pivotal role in the formulation and implementation of business strategy in the modern corporation. Obtaining and evaluating business intelligence is invaluable for describing the current environment, forecasting the future, challenging underlying assumptions, exposing and compensating for weaknesses, changing plans, and, if need be, abandoning strategies. (Herring, 1992b).

As alluded to previously, the responsibility for acquiring, analyzing, and disseminating business intelligence has historically been assigned to (some would argue usurped by) small cohorts of corporate strategists. A relatively small number of other employees, typically salespeople, may also be involved in intelligence collection and, to a much lesser degree, evaluation and dissemination. Moving up the organization, corporate and line executives typically bear some responsibility for intelligence gathering and evaluation too (Ghoshal and Kim, 1986). Of course, given their many other responsibilities, these intelligence related activities may be performed less frequently and less systematically than their more traditional activities. However, it is not uncommon for executives to routinely meet with their business intelligence units to review and coordinate the company's business intelligence activities.

Obviously, HR executives and the human resource profession as a whole must take their share of the blame for the failure of many corporations to fully utilize the information acquisition, analysis, and distribution capabilities of their employees. Irrespective of whether this failure is attributable to ignorance or timidity, a case could certainly be made that it has adversely affected the productivity, profitability, and competitiveness of many organizations. A systematic review of some of the most common and critical HR activities (beginning with recruiting and ending after retirement) demonstrates, however, that systematically incorporating business intelligence principles into these activities is not impossible, or even difficult. Rather, it seems natural and quite doable.

Alternatively, there has been some attention given to business intelligence in the increasingly globalized strategic management literature (Ghoshal and Kim, 1986; Ghoshal and Westney, 1991; Herring, 1992a; Herring, 1992b; Herring, 1993, Lenz and Engledow, 1986; Prescott and Gibbons, 1993; Prescott and Smith, 1987). However, many multinationals, particularly American corporations, and surely their HR departments, remain either ignorant or unconvinced of the importance of business intelligence. One expert has even gone so far as to say, "In the area of legitimate corporate intelligence activities, U.S. marketers appear

numbingly naive in the eyes of foreign competitors." (McDermott, 1994, p. 32). It is a good thing that they were not referring to senior executives or human resource managers in the U.S. If that were the case, "oblivious" could probably replace "naive."

When thinking about the cross-cultural ramifications of marrying HRM and BI one issue that is certainly worthy of further consideration in any discussion of business intelligence is the presence of differing ethical standards across regions and countries. Some have suggested that there are 'international standards for conducting business in the present age.' Undoubtedly, different interpretations of these ever-evolving standards certainly affect business intelligence, particularly the acquisition phase. Among other considerations, differing cultural and religious beliefs are bound to influence whether a particular business act is viewed as permissible, honorable, or scandalous. Hence, it is imperative to note that a human resource practice (or a marketing plan) that may earn an employee a bonus and a promotion in one context, may result in a fine and/or jail sentence in another.

INTERNATIONAL HRM AND BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of the top HR executives at a select group of Fortune 500 companies. The questionnaire used in the current study relies on and extends the ethics-focused work of Furash (1959) and Wall (1974). It goes considerably deeper than these studies which only asked respondents to indicate whether they believed an act was acceptable or unacceptable without assessing the strength of their feeling. In addition, it incorporates several additional constructs, most notably effectiveness assessments for certain HR practices and both ethical and effectiveness assessments at the country level. Fifty HR executives completed and returned the survey. They were typically between 45 and 55 and they were employed in a variety of industries including: media, manufacturing, electronics, heavy metal, utility, pharmaceutical, retail, banking, and insurance.

Measures

First, the 50 respondents were asked to make judgments, on a 7 point Likert scale, as to the effectiveness and ethicalness of 38 HR-related activities. The items, though updated slightly, were derived from two previous studies on this topic which asked for simple approve/disapprove responses (Furash, 1958; Wall, 1974). The list of indicators, along with their mean effectiveness and ethicalness scores (in descending order) may be found in Table 1. These responses were then plotted and a 2x2 matrix based on these two dimensions was created. As may be seen in Figure 1, the responses to these HR/BI items fell in one of four quadrants. For the purpose of illustration, these quadrants have been named the green (ethical & effective), yellow (ethical but ineffective), pink (unethical but effective), and red (unethical & ineffective) zones.

Next, the executives were asked to assess, on a 7 point Likert scale, the proficiency of 14 different countries with respect to HR effectiveness and BI effectiveness. The countries were chosen because of their relative importance to the global economy. The list of countries, along with their mean HR and BI effectiveness scores (in descending order) may be found in Table 2. To illustrate where these countries lie on these dimensions, Figure 2 places them in one of 4 quadrants. The quadrants have been labeled green (HR effective, BI effective), yellow (HR effective but BI ineffective), pink (HR ineffective but BI effective), and red (HR ineffective but BI ineffective).

RESULTS

The results from this study suggest that there is a general consensus as to which HR policies and practices are ethical and effective and which are not. Likewise, among these MNC HR executives, there appears to be some agreement as to which nations are the most effective when it comes to HR management and the use of business intelligence.

Of the activities listed in Table 1, about half are considered ethical and the other half fall below the ethicalness line in Figure 2. Using publicly available information about a competitor, monitoring targeted competitors, and utilizing the expertise of a competitor's former employee all seem to be acceptable. On the other hand, deceptive acts, theft, and entrapment, though possibly effective, are nearly universally believed to cross the unethical line.

At a national level, Japan appears to be the best at managing its HR and BI functions (Figure 2). Then, there is a cluster of countries that do a fairly good job at both of these crucial tasks. This cluster includes: USA, Canada, Israel, UK, Germany, Republic of China (Taiwan), and France. On the low end, Mexico and the People's Republic of China received effective scores for their business intelligence acumen, but they are believed to be ineffective in their HR management. The countries which fell into the least desirable quadrant (ineffective HR and ineffective BI), were India and Russia.

DISCUSSION

This preliminary investigation into the relationship between international human resource management and business intelligence was undertaken to better understand how to build a bridge between these important functions. Only recently have researchers even begun to make this connection at a descriptive or prescriptive level (Fleisher and Schoenfeld, 1993). This is one of the first studies of its type to empirically study these constructs.

The implications of these findings for practitioners and researchers are profound. first, practitioners need to know how to effectively manage their increasingly far-flung human resources without breaking the law or violating an established ethical principle. As the global arena expands and the number of players increases, competition is sure to bring out the best and worst in

organizations and their representatives. Accordingly, managers and employees need to at least be aware of the potential ethical pitfalls and land mines that may confront them. Likewise, market participants need to know how the MNC's country of origin will affect the way it manages its people and the way it manages its intelligence operations.

As for researchers, it is obvious that many questions remain unaddressed or unanswered. For instance, is there universal agreement as to what HR practices are unethical? Recall that this study sampled a group of US human resource executives. Future studies should examine these constructs from the perspective of HR executives worldwide. It would also be appropriate to question these individuals about the HR and BI effectiveness of the countries they view as their strongest competitors.

In addition, the list of HR activities could be expanded to include an emerging array of new business intelligence practices. Of course, some BI practices will never change. However, the information explosion has created some new alternatives or, at the least, expedited some old ones. For example, some companies are using the Internet to bait and hire away their competitors' employees. Using an alias on an Internet provider other than that of the company itself, recruiters are targeting chat group participants and sending out employment ads to discussion groups. Some are even posing technical questions or asking for help to elicit responses from the most qualified candidates, further refining the search process.

Finally, the potential for using human resource practices to better inform the business intelligence function seems unfulfilled, yet unlimited. Surely, there are ways to develop a strategic BI focus throughout the organization. This mission could be achieved by spreading a BI influence throughout each and every HR sub function. Applicants could be selected based on their BI proficiency. Employees could be trained on the principles and practices of BI. Managers and their subordinates could be rewarded for their BI contributions. As should be evident, the possibilities and payoffs for bridging the gap between International HR and BI are limitless.

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Table 1
HR/BI Effectiveness & Ethicalness

BI/HR Practice	Effectiveness	Ethicalness
Green		
An employee uses the annual report or other legitimately obtained financial records of a competitor for analysis.	5.5	6.4
An employee subscribes to a trade journal and extracts information from it concerning a competitor.	5.3	6.5
A manager instructs employees to report any changes in competitors' activities.	5.4	6.1
A company's sales staff, before submitting a bid, analyses the competition and attempts to predict the prices and terms of their bid.	5.4	6.0
A manager hires a consultant to do a market survey with a specific emphasis on a competitor's current and future courses of action.	5.6	5.7
An employee is sent to "shop" a competitor's store to get product and pricing information.	5.5	5.8
An employee uses the internet or other computer databases to search for information and articles on a competitor.	5.2	6.0
A manager uses their corporate lawyers to acquire information as to possible patent infringement by a competitor.	5.3	5.9
An employee attends a trade fair and obtains information from a competitor's exhibit and booth.	4.9	6.1
A company regularly purchases their competitors' goods and analyzes them using reverse engineering.	5.5	5.3
A database of internal "experts" on various subjects is maintained by a company to assist other employees in the given areas.	5.1	5.5
An employee visits the local courthouse and obtains informative public records about the competition.	4.7	5.9
A firm "hires away" a key employee from a competitor.	5.4	4.8
A manager, learning of a competitor's test market, quickly puts on a special sale in the same location.	4.9	5.0
Employees are instructed to report any information that concerns the competition in any way.	4.7	5.2
Campus recruiters are used to observe the hiring practices of competitors.	4.7	5.2
A manager gains information by conducting a legitimate employment interview with a competitor's employee.	4.7	4.8
Employees are instructed to and rewarded for bringing in any direct mail they receive from the competition.	4.2	5.3
Employees are assigned to observe a specific area of a competitor's operations and make reports to their managers.	4.8	4.6
A manager attends a technical meeting and through questioning "draws" answers out of a competitor's employee.	4.7	4.5
An oil company manager establishes a scout department to watch the drilling activities of competitors.	4.7	4.5
Yellow		
The Human Resource department maintains a database of employees that formerly worked for competitors.	3.9	4.5
Pink		
New hires that formerly worked for competitors are "debriefed" after they have been hired.	5.0	3.8
A manager hires a detective agency to acquire, in any way possible, information as to possible patent infringement by a competitor.	4.6	3.5
An employee poses as a potential customer to get information from a competitor.	4.7	3.0
A manager hires a detective to watch the proving grounds of a competitor.	4.3	3.3
A manager "wines and dines" his competitive counterpart, pumping him or her for information.	4.0	3.4
An employee gains competitive information from a friend at a competitor and uses the information in strategic planning.	4.2	3.0
Spouses that work for competitors use information that they learned at home to make decisions within their organization.	4.4	2.6
A manager rewards competitors' employees for bringing certain information about the products or processes of a competitor.	4.4	1.9
A manager gains information by conducting an interview with a competitor's employee without an intent to hire.	4.1	2.3
Plans a re stolen of a competitor's new model.	5.2	1.1
A company secretly records the conversations of a competitor.	4.8	1.3
A confederate is planted in a competitor's organization.	4.6	1.5
Red		
A manager releases false information his company or products to confuse the competition.	3.2	2.6
A manager "wines and dines" a competitor's secretary in hopes of obtaining information.	3.7	2.9
An employee is sent to be interviewed as a job applicant by a competitor with the hopes of gaining information, without an intent to be hired.	3.4	1.9
A manager arranges to "set up" a competitor in a compromising position with a person of the opposite sex in order to persuade them to release information.	3.2	1.2

Table 2
HR/BI Effectiveness By Country

Country	HR Effectiveness	BI Effectiveness
Green		
Japan	5.6	6.1
Israel	5.1	5.3
Taiwan	4.8	5.6
Germany	4.9	5.4
USA	5.2	5.0
Canada	5.1	4.9
Korea	4.3	5.5
France	4.6	5.1
UK	4.8	4.9
Brazil	4.2	4.3
Pink		
China	3.1	4.9
Mexico	3.7	4.2
India	3.7	4.0
Red		
Russia	2.7	3.9

Figure 1
HR/BI Effectiveness and Ethicalness

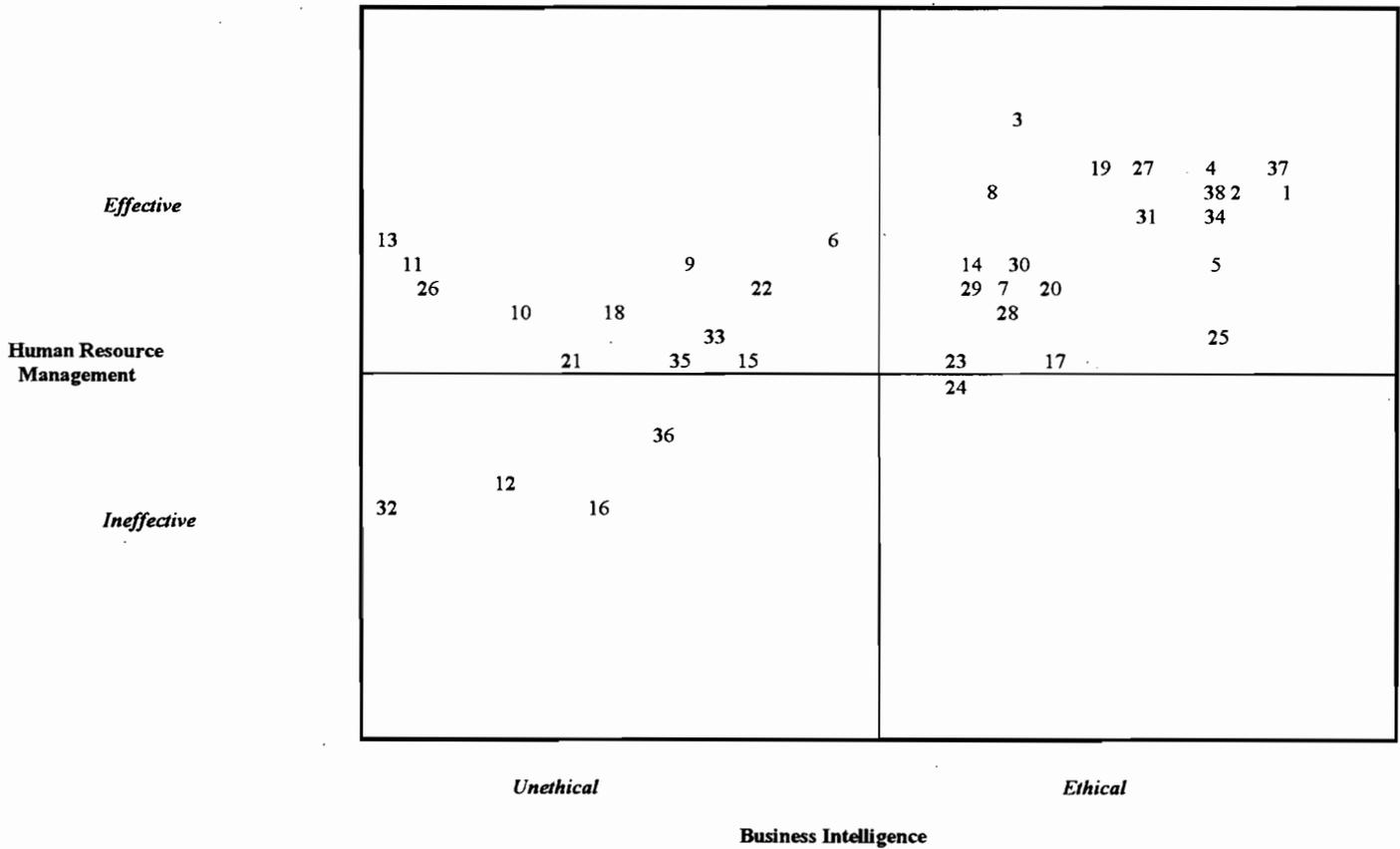
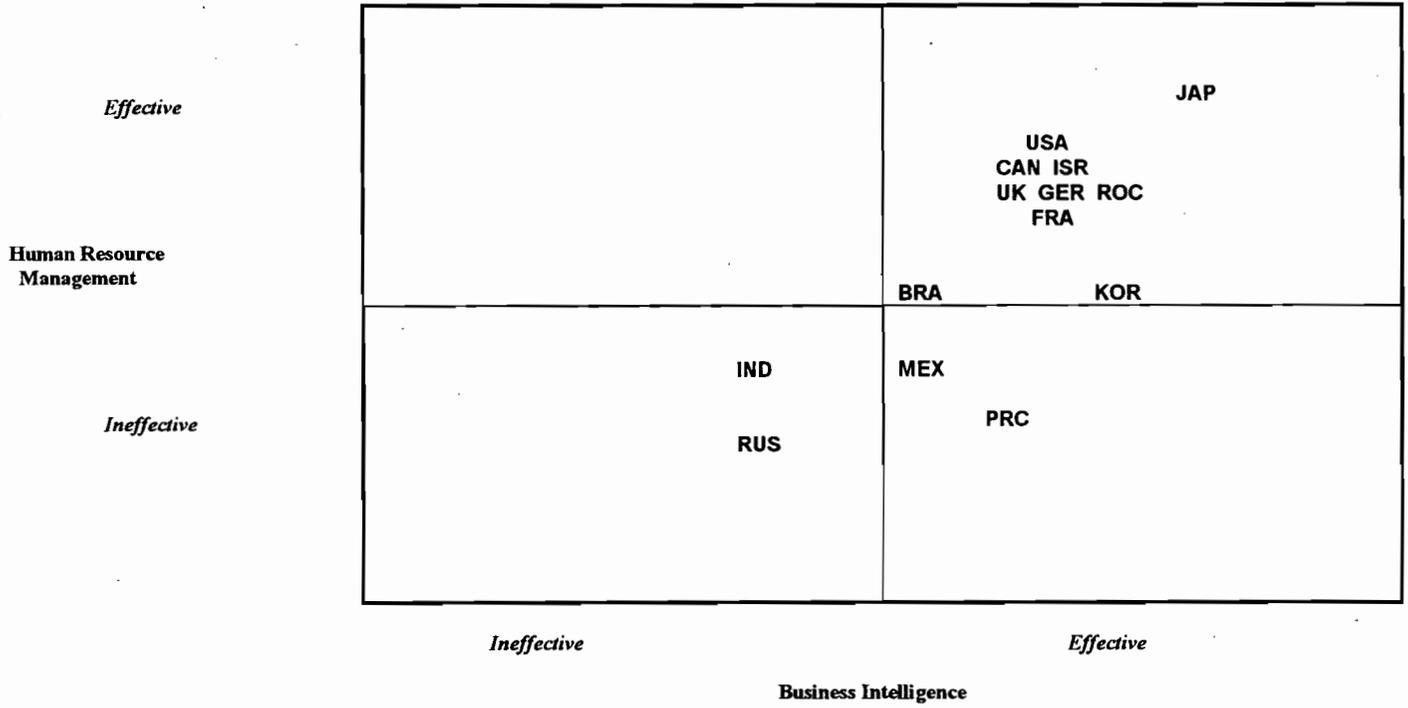


Figure 2
HR/BI Effectiveness by Country



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