

SUCCEEDING ON ASIA-RELATED CI PROJECTS THROUGH BETTER REQUIREMENTS DEFINITION

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In competitive intelligence, as in other fields, success comes more easily if you do the proper planning first. Planning is particularly important for competitive intelligence (CI) projects relating to Asia. But how much planning is enough; and what kind? For Western firms, working in Asia means dealing with a complex web of technical, logistical, and cultural issues relating to data collection and analysis.

My colleague Jayant Chandra, who works in India, notes that Western analysts who focus on Indian markets need to recognize the country's vast diversity of languages, cultural patterns, and business practices, and then plan their projects accordingly. (For more information, see the sidebar.)

As in any other CI work, if you don't have clear requirements you can spend hours on *ad hoc* fixes later on. Too much planning, though, can lead to "analysis paralysis" -- all your effort going into organizing rather than implementing. So when the next Asia-related project comes your way, can you define the requirements in a way that makes your project a success?

KEEP IT SIMPLE, BUT NOT TOO MUCH

To keep projects on track, first apply the timeless "KISS principle" -- often expressed as "Keep It Simple, Stupid," but I prefer the more civil version, "Keep It Short and Simple." But in the words of Albert Einstein, known for pithy expressions of complex scientific concepts, "everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler" (BrightQuotes).

By oversimplifying your plans,

you run the risk of being unprepared for unexpected events—for example, members of your team become sick, or overseas partners are bought out, or the undersea Internet cable to Asia stops functioning an hour before you need to send final deliverables, or local exchange rates shift substantially against your firm. To keep your planning at the right level of overall detail, first make sure you have clear requirements.

CLARIFY REQUIREMENTS

The obvious approach to receiving clear requirement would seem to be, "Just focus on what the customer wants, and then work to achieve that." Unfortunately, the ambiguous nature of human language makes this difficult. As in so many parts of life—say, politics or religion—two people can interpret exactly the same statement in completely different ways. Management scholar J. Frame Davidson, a professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., notes that when project requirements are couched in ambiguous terms,

disagreement can become vehement, since it is clear to each party what the specification is saying, and the fact that the other party does not view the specification "correctly" is attributed to obstinacy, stupidity, or outright dishonesty. (Frame 1995, p. 137)

In light of this reality, both sides must *define* their terms and then establish a formal requirements plan. Include definitions as part of your

initial proposal, and refine them based on the kickoff meeting with your customer. Spell out the exact nature of your project deliverables, both in terms of format and information contained. Clearly state what the customer intends to do with each item.

For example, will your findings on the customer's key competitors be provided as narrative profiles in a printed document which is part of a briefing packet for senior executives at the customer's annual conference? Or will the same information be incorporated into a web-based portal for use by mid-level marketing managers?

TRACK CHANGES

Create and populate a "Change Log" so that you can track any changes in the project's requirements during the process. Add columns to highlight the reason for the change, and how it will affect timeline, deliverables, resources, etc. Also include a note on the priority of the change (High, Medium, and Low).

Have a clear agreement regarding the project's rate of progress and effort level. For example, Cipher has conducted numerous surveys of various segments of the Asian telecommunications industry. For some of these surveys, the customer requested extensive primary interviews with local subject matter experts. In such cases, we make sure the customer understands that collection may take longer than in a Western setting because of language barriers and local business cultures.

Before adopting any planning method, gauge the proper "planning

SIDEBAR: MANAGING CI PROJECTS IN INDIA: A FIRST-HAND LOOK

My colleague Jayant Chandra, based in India, notes that Western analysts who focus on India need to recognize the major challenges facing competitive intelligence efforts in that part of the world. Jayant notes, for example, that a CI firm that wanted to target a specific segment of India's vast consumer market would need to consider the following issues.

Ethnic / Demographic Issues

Language: Hindi is the country's national language, but is spoken by only around 40% of India's 1.14 billion people. English serves as the most important language for political and business communication, but India has more than 22 completely different languages spoken by millions of people. This diversity of language, along with local dialects, makes it a gargantuan task to conduct a market survey at the grassroots level.

Demographics: India's population is sharply divided along education and income lines. The vast majority of the population (approximately 72%) lives in rural areas or around 550,000 villages, and may be hard to reach by survey

experts.

Ethnicity and Regional

Disparity: India being a vast country encompasses people from various ethnic groups. The total number being around 2,000, it reflects the variation in culture and religion. India's 27 states differ from each other widely in language, culture, and religious beliefs; and their inhabitants should not be considered as "generic Indian consumers."

Socio-Economic / Political Issues

Economy: More than 70% of the population is directly involved in agriculture, which accounts for almost 19% of the Indian GDP. This stands in sharp distinction to the urban economies of many Western nations, which are based either on manufacturing or services. This goes hand in hand with the fact that millions of Indians live in rural areas, and therefore need to be reached by different methods than urban populations.

Communications: Differing communications styles affect strategic planning and the establishment of trust with government, financial institutions, and other key

organizations—and these styles vary from state to state. In addition, due to India's relatively high illiteracy rate, surveys cannot rely only on written forms. (As of 2001, overall literacy was 61%, but with significant gender disparity. Male literacy was at 73.4% and female literacy at 47.8%.)

Logistics: Distribution/ infrastructure/transportation challenges are widespread since poorly maintained roads, rail, sea ports, airports and an unreliable power grid create distribution and shipping difficulties. This hinders the outreach and delivery time for survey data.

Governmental and Legal

Issues: Government and legal issues, specifically bureaucratic red tape, and an inconsistent interpretation of rules pose a major drawback not only in business launch but also in conducting market surveys. Also, India's tax system is considered complex and bureaucratic by international business community, and the laws are open to wide interpretation.

horizon" for the project. Always keep in mind the words of the Chinese proverb: "When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees" (ThinkExist.com). A quick market survey ("planting corn") that lasts only a few weeks may require only a few days of planning, but a broader, multi-stage study ("planting trees") that supports a customer's major initiative can require months of preparation..

Whatever planning model you adopt, remember that no plan—no matter how detailed—survives contact with reality. As General Dwight

Eisenhower put it, in describing his experiences as a top military leader in two world wars, "I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." (BrainyQuote.com) To translate a task into the world of CI: know the requirement—and stick to it—but stay flexible in implementation. This balanced approach will help you navigate between the twin dangers of "ad hoc" and "analysis paralysis," and ensure that your Asia-related project is a success.

FURTHER READING

For people who are managing global projects, two books that provide an excellent introduction are Donald A. DePalma's *Business Without Borders: A Strategic Guide to Global Marketing*, Globa Vista Press, 2004, and Jeanette S. Martin and Lillian H. Chaney's *Global Business Etiquette: A Guide to International Communications and Customs*, Westport, CT, Praeger, 2006. DePalma provides an overview on how to navigate the global Internet-based economy, which he terms the "Eighth Continent." Martin and Chaney

remind readers that “going global” means knowing that other people do things differently. Sometimes, just being aware of those regional differences may help you clarify requirements with your customers.

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