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COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

A MEANS TO SUCCESS

SMART CHANGE STARTS HERE.

One of the biggest challenges any business may have is identifying the next steps to move forward on new strategies and problem solving. What most people don't realize is that many of the answers are right in front of them. An emerging term, "Collective Intelligence" (CI), is a real solution-oriented phrase. Simply defined, CI is the principle of how connecting groups of people, information, and machines can lead to more intelligent behavior and more effective problem solving. This important concept has to do with making decisions together, forming a consensus, soliciting different ideas and questions from employees, suppliers, customers and peers, and then utilizing these insights to motivate the internal team to higher levels of achievement. The thought of adding strategic collaboration with supply partners and proactively receiving input from customers is not used enough. In today's complex, fast changing business world, to be a winning company one needs all the input from every different resource possible. A critical step in achieving success is listening to as many different sources as possible and then evaluating all the new and exciting opportunities.

Through the years an expression heard over and over is "We were born with two ears and one mouth," meaning we must listen more than we talk. Today, things get so incredibly busy and hectic that it's difficult to concentrate on anything except trying to stay ahead. However, in order to be competitive, you need to find time to look at opportunities that could generate new revenue streams and at the same time improve productivity. The printing industry is undergoing a lot of new competitive forces from digital areas.

One of the more interesting examples of Collective Intelligence is the search capability of the Internet. When someone needs information on a topic, the first place we look today is online—whether it is on our computer or mobile device. Millions of people and companies all over the world have created web pages and mobile apps that link everything to each other. Then all that knowledge is harvested online by companies like Amazon, Apple, Google, and Microsoft. You type a question in the search bar, and the answers you get often seem amazingly intelligent. Now let's take that same principle and apply it to a graphic communication company.

As we talk about what CI is, there are several questions that come to mind. How can collective intelligence grow your business? How does listening actually impact the production of your company? What do you need to know to stay ahead of the curve? Where do you look to obtain good, reliable information on the issues facing your graphics company? Many people realize their traditional methods of doing business need an upgrade, and that such an upgrade would enable them to increase productivity and profitability. But when things are slow, and with many customers identifying alternate routes for the delivery of content, there's no time to research new ideas; and the financial costs to hire a consultant can be prohibitive. The lack of funds is harmful.

That is where Collective Intelligence comes into play. What many executives don't realize is that they have multiple resources which won't cost them much at all. The first is your employees, the second is vendor partners, the third is your customers, fourth is trade associations, annual shows, and conferences, and lastly, networking.



CI RESOURCE ONE

The graphic arts community is mostly composed of many small business entities. These organizations of fewer than 100 employees are asking their workers to provide many diverse tasks, keeping them so busy that there is little time to reflect and offer suggestions for improvement. However, providing time for employees to offer input and suggestions, and implementing new ideas based on their knowledge, is one of the best parts of CI. Many company executives feel they are the one and only leader. Therefore, all ideas and business decisions must come from them. The thought process is "If I am the owner of the company, I should provide direction, leadership, and support to the team." That thought process is flawed. Leaders don't need to have all the answers. Many

in the workforce have great insight into ideas that could lead to improved productivity and new sales revenue streams. Often the challenge is just giving them the chance to speak. Many companies have monthly town halls, but often workers feel a bit intimidated to offer up a suggestion or to speak in front of their peers. A good leader, by keeping an open door, may overcome that situation. Another idea is to have informal gatherings of 5-10 workers sit and discuss a situation with the ability to speak openly and candidly. Many great ideas may come out of that. The old suggestion box can still work as well. A company must learn to leverage the powers of their employees to increase revenue and ensure future job security, and make for a viable, forward thinking business model.

CI RESOURCE TWO

Ever think of your software and hardware provider as a resource for success? Most of the time the only contact the graphics company has with the vendor is with the sales rep, who is primarily interested in selling more product, or a service technician who comes to fix a problem. The interesting thing is that most smart OEMs have a gigantic resource of people who can cut through the noise and help you chart a

strategy to gain a professional edge. These suppliers have the resources to transform your ability to analyze business challenges and lead change, all at minimum or no cost. Output integrity is critical in the print business, and the supply chain knows this. In recent years, many companies have initiated business development programs and started affinity groups where education is the main focus.



CI RESOURCE THREE

Customers can be one of the most significant resources in the CI process. Asking customers about what is changing in their respective organizations, and what are now the best mediums they want to utilize to deliver content, can be vital. In the past, print salespeople would visit and try to sell more ink on paper without listening to their customer's needs. The commission they received was dependent on large orders. However, the

digital world has changed the way orders are received—smaller, personalized runs are shown to be more effective. Listening to the customer's challenges can change the client/supplier paradigm, since much of what occurs is centered on the best use of data in delivering the content to the right person at the right time with the right message and utilizing the right medium.

CI RESOURCE FOUR

There are many trade associations in our industry, such as Association for Print Technologies, Idealliance, Printing Industries of America (with their regional affiliates), and many more oriented to services like mailing, in-plants, etc. There are also affinity groups associated with vendors—Connect, THINK,

Aleyant, etc. Then there are the annual and regularly scheduled trade shows like PRINT, Drupa, and Printing United, dedicated to providing a unique environment to learn, see new hardware and software, exchange knowledge, share experiences, and build long-lasting professional relationships with vendors.

CI RESOURCE FIVE

Networking can be one of the most cathartic means of learning. Sitting at a table, openly discussing issues or chatting with a peer about common challenges, is enlightening and often compassionate. Peer groups are one of the best vehicles for achieving this end. Many of the

trade associations have organized peer groups where you can spend valuable time networking with those experiencing many of the same challenges as you, and learning how they are dealing with them.



The five CI Resources cited above should be viewed as outstanding opportunities for developing an ongoing process leading to a new path for success. One can no longer rely solely on traditional practices. A smart business leader must seek new practical ideas.

Fenway Group, a Boston, MA graphic communications company, may best exemplify how CI can lead to a strategic growth path. They knew the graphics industry was undergoing great change with the advent of digital technology and that they needed to identify a clear direction forward. Rick Sands, the company CEO, was researching a digital print engine and was discussing this offering with his employees to get their input. "In 2008, at Fenway, we started to identify how modern marketers were looking for new ways to engage with their customers with personal, relevant communications. We didn't have the knowledge base to move forward with any confidence to meet these needs." Fenway discussed with their customers what was changing in their business and what the company could do to meet these requirements. Rick then attended the annual PRINT Show in Chicago to compare devices and participate in seminars. Sands relates that "after intense research we decided on the Canon imagePRESS. As we discussed our options internally, we learned that Canon had a program called Essential Business Builder (EBB). EBB was designed to assist us in learning the essential tools to meet these marketing requirements." Canon Solutions America brought experts to Fenway's plant to educate their team, which escalated Fenway to a higher level. Fenway continues

to participate in the ongoing networking and learning of the thINK affinity group for Canon Solutions America digital production print customers. This Collective Intelligence helped Fenway grow almost five-fold in 10 years.

Companies face many obstacles to success, creating demands for changing expectations. Collective Intelligence is a viable scenario to forge a path forward. In the past, employees and suppliers were often kept separate from one another, with very little interaction. Succeeding in today's volatile business world requires organizations to be practical, productive, innovative, strategic, and forward-thinking. Every resource where one can learn and gain new, insightful knowledge is critical to not only surviving but thriving. Today, companies need to envision their people, suppliers, customers, and others on a continuum where collaboration and knowledge enrich each other in a reinforcing loop. A workplace which implements Collective Intelligence gains benefits through this cooperative effort, leading to a brighter, more productive future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Steven Schnoll is the managing director in the consulting firm of SCHNOLL MEDIA CONSULTING. He has had leadership and ownership interests spanning several decades in five content media organizations and one software company. He has built a reputation as a practical innovator for companies attempting to enter new markets or revitalizing existing markets. Steven was inducted into the prestigious Ben Franklin Honor Society of the Printing Industries of America in 2008.

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