SMEs' attitude towards SI programmes: evidence from Belgium

Sophie Larivet[a]* and François Brouard[b]

[a]ESCE, Pôle Universitaire Léonard de Vinci, Paris La Défense cedex, 92916, France; [b]Sprott School of Business, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, 824 Dunton Tower, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada

This paper presents the findings of an empirical study of Strategic Intelligence (SI) in Belgian (Walloon) small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The main objective of the research was to take stock of the attitude towards SI initiatives directed at small businesses. More precisely, the research aimed to establish whether or not some threats to such programmes, identified by previous studies, needed to be taken into account in the Walloon approach. These threats mainly lay in the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of SMEs' attitudes, used as a framework for analysis. A total of 250 phone interviews were carried out with the head or a top manager of each SME. The research reveals a lack of awareness of SI and SI programmes and a gap between the SMEs' self-confidence in their information level and their intelligence practices. In short, findings show that Wallonia is a virgin territory for SI and does not suffer from all the handicaps that have been identified in studies of other countries' programmes.

Keywords: strategic intelligence; competitive intelligence; SMEs; Belgium; attitude

Introduction

Public policy supporting Competitive Intelligence (CI) is scarce. The involvement of the French government and public institutions in implementing a national CI programme, mainly directed towards SMEs, could even be considered unique (Smith, Wright, & Pickton, 2010). In her seminal research, Bergeron (2000) found that most countries do not focus on CI, but rather implement more general plans involving scientific and technological information, foresight, or knowledge management. In countries such as Sweden or the USA, private-based initiatives are more common. Therefore, the recent Belgian initiative of developing Strategic Intelligence (SI) in SMEs through a public institution, about 10 years after France implemented its policy, deserves attention. Previous research (Bergeron, 2000; Salles, 2001) has shown that SMEs' attitude might be a threat to CI programme implementation. In this particular setting, and based on a tri-component view of attitude, this paper addresses the issue of SME decision-makers' attitude towards SI programmes.

The outline of the article is as follows: the first section of the article describes the research context and the concept of SI. Research positioning and relevance are then explained, followed by the research question and framework. The next section delineates the methodology, followed by results and a discussion. Future research is suggested in the conclusion.

---

*Corresponding author. Email: sophie.larivet@esce.fr

Research context: ASE's SI conception and programme

The *Agence de Stimulation Économique* (ASE; Economic Stimulation Agency) is a public institution created in 2006 as part of what is known as the Marshall Plan for Wallonia. Wallonia is the mainly French-speaking southern region of Belgium; over the past decades, it has suffered from a sharp decline in heavy industry. It has its own regional government, which launched this recovery plan in 2004. The Walloon government has charged the ASE with organising and co-ordinating a group of services and tools dedicated to entrepreneurs. One of these programmes consists of developing SI among SMEs and is the first large-scale SI development project in Belgium.

The expression SI was chosen by the ASE in order to differentiate from the French and Anglo-Saxon concepts of Economic Intelligence and CI (ASE, no date a). Nevertheless, the ASE definition of SI is very close to the French concept of Economic Intelligence. The Walloon organisation considers it a 'multidisciplinary approach based on three fundamental pillars: intelligence, protection, and influence' (ASE, no date b, authors' translation). This definition, similar to those of many French experts (Clerc, 1995; Harbulot, 1995; Larivet, 2004; Levet & Paturel, 1996), is broader than the Anglo-Saxon definition of CI. SI includes CI, defined by Wright and Pickton (1998, p. 76) as 'the strategic process of identifying, understanding and using Critical Success Factors', but also encompasses safety or security measures (designed to safeguard information and intangible assets such as knowledge, databases or reputation) and influence or lobbying practices.

The ASE programme is a public initiative directed towards SMEs that is more or less comparable to the French chambers of commerce programmes as depicted by Smith et al. (2010). The main difference is that the ASE SI network is made up of 'operators' that are far from being exclusively regional chambers of commerce but are still local economic development actors. Unlike in France, in Belgium SI is not considered to be a responsibility for the State although state institutions might play a role (for instance, a draft agreement concerning the protection aspects was signed with the Belgian State Security Service). Besides, even though its geographic and language proximity made France the main benchmark over other countries, the ASE wanted to avoid one of the French pitfalls in using the concept of Economic Intelligence: the confusion with economic espionage. This confusion is so frequent in France that some chambers of commerce no longer use the expression Economic Intelligence, fearing negative reactions from entrepreneurs (Smith et al., 2010). Consequently, when the ASE started its own programme in 2007, it decided to adopt the use of an expression that French speakers would not be as likely to associate with illegal practices.

As in French chambers of commerce, the ASE programme includes awareness actions (such as conferences), training (several theoretical and practical training sessions about different aspects of SI) and coaching (SI audits and personalised advising). By the end of 2010, awareness programmes had reached 680 SMEs, training sessions were delivered to 140 SMEs and 99 SMEs had been individually coached (ASE, personal communication, 19 November 2010). These SMEs had been subjectively selected by Walloon economic development operators. At this stage of the programme, the ASE felt a need for further investigation in order to design future programmes. They thus decided to survey two samples: first, SMEs that had been trained in SI, and second, a random sample of SMEs. This second part of the research is presented in this article.

Research positioning and relevance

Engaged research

This research, as it was initiated by the ASE, is in line with what Van de Ven (2007) calls 'engaged scholarship', that is, a participative form of research involving academics and practitioners working together to solve a problem. According to Van de Ven (2007), this co-production of knowledge is better grounded and more insightful and useful than research conducted by researchers alone.

In pursuance of engaged scholarship principles, each step of the research was co-constructed by the various stakeholders. Among them, the ASE started and funded the project. Several people from the ASE, mainly the Director, the Head of SI and Innovation and an SI coach, were involved in the research process. A marketing agency named Expansion was also part of the project, mainly through two senior consultants. Their competencies lay in designing and conducting a quantitative survey and in making recommendations about how to promote the SI programme. One of the authors of this paper was engaged in each step of the research process and frequently interacted with the other actors, developing a closer relationship to the setting, whereas the other one was positioned as a 'detached, impartial onlooker' (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 269) with a less context-specific point of view. Both researchers were already familiar with SI in SMEs. Other stakeholders, mainly professors, other SI experts and local economic actors, took a small part in the data interpretation step.

Thus, each research activity, notably problem formulation, research design and recommendations, was negotiated and shared or discussed by some or all participants, depending on their competencies. The objective was to try to meet the goal of both scholarly quality and practical relevance (Pettigrew, 2001), with researchers and practitioners acting as equals in the process (Van de Ven, 2007).

This research positioning made it compulsory for the ASE and researchers to share an interest in SI in Walloon SMEs. The ASE's concern with the subject and setting of the research is obvious, but the academic relevance should be further detailed.

Academic relevance

One reason for our interest in this research was that no study of CI or SI had ever been done in Wallonia. A quantitative survey of CI in Belgium (and South Africa) was published by De Pelsmacker et al., in 2005 (see also Saayman et al., 2008), but the Belgian sample was made up of Flemish companies only, and is thus nearly impossible to consider as a study of the same country. In practical terms, Flanders and Wallonia can be regarded as two separate countries, even if they officially make up one state. Indeed, 'business and social conditions in Flanders, Brussels-Capital, and Wallonia have always been significantly different and will probably become more so' (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010, p. 8).

The context of the Walloon and Belgian economy also created a good case for studying this region. Belgium is the 20th largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (International Monetary Fund, 2010), and Wallonia's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is greater than that of Flanders (Institut Wallon de l'Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Statistique, 2011). Moreover, Belgium is ranked just before Sweden, known as a CI benchmark (Bergeron, 2000; Commissariat Général du Plan, 1994).

In addition, for a number of reasons, we do not fully agree with Wright and Calof (2006) when they suggest that country-level studies are now of little use because they remain at the macro level. First, this kind of applied research is useful for practitioners, which is one of the objectives of engaged research. The ASE initiative is directly inspired by similar French

initiatives, but awareness, culture and attitude towards SI might be different in Belgium and thus have consequences for the programme design. According to Bergeron (2000), some national cultural traits might favour CI programme implementation. Second, as stated by Wright and Calof (2006) themselves, some of the numerous CI country-level studies they have examined present measurement problems. Before them, Bergeron (2000) had been more severe, writing that some nations' reputations for CI, such as those of Sweden or Japan, might be based on misunderstandings, exaggerations, scarce examples frequently repeated or, at the least, lack of sufficient documentation. There is thus room for improvement. A third reason why repeated country-level surveys remain interesting is that awareness, attitudes, and behaviour might change over the years. Smith, Wright and Pickton (2011) suggest that this is the case in France after over 10 years of public initiatives.

Lastly, CI research focusing on small businesses is not a saturated field. As far as we can tell, SME-focused research has been conducted in a rather small number of countries: Canada; France; Switzerland; Turkey; and the USA (Bergeron, 2000; Brouard, 2006; Bulinge, 2002; Groom & David, 2001; Koseoglu, Karayormuk, Parnell, & Menefee 2011; Larivet, 2004; Madinier, 2007; Phanuel & Levy, 2002; Salles 2001; Smith et al., 2010; Tarraf & Molz 2006; Wright, Bisson, & Duffy 2011). Burt's (2005, p. 245) invitation still seems relevant in this particular field: 'When you have an opportunity to learn how someone in another group does what you do differently – go.'

Research question and framework

As explained above, the ASE SI programme was built following the French example. From 2007 to 2010, the ASE and its network of 'operators' experimented with awareness, training and coaching sessions. The latter were often offered to SMEs whose dynamism or innovativeness gave the ASE a reason to believe that their owners would have a positive attitude toward SI and the SI programme. Before enlarging its offer to the general Walloon SME population, the ASE needed to take stock of the attitudes of Walloon SME decision-makers towards SI programmes and of their intention to participate in such programmes. Considering the centrality of the decision-maker in SMEs, 'SMEs' will be used as shorthand for 'SME decision-makers' in the paragraphs below.

Even if recent theory shows a far more complex process, attitude is still considered an antecedent to intention, which is an antecedent to behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). Here the research objective was not to draw a predictive model of the demand for ASE programmes, but to explore Walloon SMEs' attitude and intention towards such programmes, in order to detect any potential threats that could prevent SMEs from participating in SI programmes. As a matter of fact, previous work had identified threats to the development of CI initiatives; these threats can be categorised into attitudinal (cognitive, affective, behavioural) dimensions using Rosenberg and Hovland's (1960) tri-component model.

Threats related to the cognitive dimension

In her seminal work, Bergeron (2000) describes the lack of an informational and strategic culture. As many authors have found (Bergeron, 2000; Larivet, 2004; Smith et al., 2010), the majority of SMEs lack a clear understanding of SI (or the similar term used in different countries), seeing the concept as vague or abstract (Brouard, 2006; Smith et al., 2010). SMEs are not always conscious of their needs, or their needs can be unclear. Salles (2001) thus notes aberrations in the expression of information needs in SMEs. For instance, SMEs engaged in cost and delay reduction plans do not feel the need to collect information about

production. Bergeron (2000) concludes that the importance of CI is simply not recognised, and that SMEs are thus unfamiliar with CI programmes.

Threats related to the affective dimension

In France, which is very close to Wallonia in terms of language and geography, CI is often associated with economic espionage (Smith et al., 2010). The confusion is even considered to be responsible for a negative emotional response (fear or mistrust) to the promotion of CI programmes. The research group therefore decided to make the following hypothesis: SMEs might feel reluctant or hesitant about SI programmes, with the idea that 'SI is for big companies only'. Many authors (cf. Bulinge, 2001; Phanuel & Levy, 2002; Salles, 2001) have indeed noticed a size effect on firms' practices. SMEs might thus not feel concerned by SI questions.

Threats related to the behavioural dimension

According to Bergeron (2000), there is no real demand for CI programmes from SMEs, due to a lack of awareness. One of the French CI directors quoted by Smith et al. (2010, p. 530) says, 'I've never had an SME come to me ask – I need help with CI.' Other behaviours also have to be taken into account: for instance, exporting is considered to be related to CI practices (Phanuel & Levy 2002; Salles, 2001). Bergeron (2000) sees globalisation as a contributing factor to the development of CI programmes. Not having an international presence, or not wishing to have one, could have a negative (behavioural) impact on the demand for SI programmes. Finally, how actively Walloon SMEs are practising SI could be a threat for the development of SI programmes (if they are already very proactive), or would require a level adaptation. Previous research (Bergeron, 2000; Brouard, 2006; Bulinge, 2002; Groom & David, 2001; Koseoglu et al., 2011; Larivet 2004; Madinier 2007; Phanuel & Levy 2002; Salles 2001; Smith et al., 2010; Tarraf & Molz 2006; Wright et al., 2011) generally agrees that in each country studied, some SMEs do practise CI or SI, even if very proactive small businesses are rare.

Methodology

Questionnaire

The previous theoretical framework served as a guide to analysing potential threats to the ASE programme. Assessing these threats required building a new tool. Previous studies, such as those of Rouach and Santi (2001) or Wright, Pickton, and Callow (2002) were not replicable because they were designed for companies already aware of the concept. As 79% of Walloon SMEs employ between five and 20 employees (COFACE/EuroDB, 2007, quoted by Agence Wallonne des Télécommunications, 2007), it seemed highly probable, given previous research, that most of them would not know what SI is.

Consequently, a new questionnaire was built that involved 33 questions divided into eight topics (see Table 1). Yes/no questions, scaled questions and open-ended questions were used as described in Table 1. The questionnaire was written and administered in French (the translation in Table 1 was done for academic purposes only).

Sampling method

The survey was administered from 20 August to 8 September 2010. SMEs' names and phone numbers were extracted from the Ketels database, developed by the Spectron

Table 1. Questionnaire structure.

Topic 1: Firm's satisfaction about its information level	Q1: Do you know your current clients' needs? *[semantic scale]* Q2: Do you know your prospects' needs? *[semantic scale]* Q4: Tell me if you keep yourself informed about developments in the following elements in your environment: - Q4a: your Belgian competitors *[semantic scale]* - Q4b: your foreign competitors *[semantic scale]* - Q4c: your current or potential suppliers *[semantic scale]* - Q4d: technologies and production methods useful to your company *[semantic scale]* - Q4e: changes in regulations *[semantic scale]*
Topic 2: Strategic practices	Q3: Most of the time, when you approach a new market, it is *[a) to respond to a client's needs / b) to retaliate to a competitor's move / c) to seek out a new opportunity / d) through chance meeting or reading]* Q5: How often do you make strategic plans? *[semantic scale]* Q6: When was the last time you launched a new service/product in Belgium? *[semantic scale]* Q7: When was the last time you launched a new service/product outside Belgium? *[semantic scale]*
Topic 3: Spontaneous perception of SI	Q8: Could you tell me in a few words what the concept of 'Strategic Intelligence' means to you? *[open-ended question]* Q9: [only if they didn't answer 'I don't know' to Q8]: How did you become aware of what SI is? *[open-ended question]*

Before they proceeded to the following questions, telemarketers briefly explained SI:

'From now, we will call SI a business approach that consists of Strategic Information literacy and protection, including three practices: environmental scanning; information protection; and influence.'

Topic 4: Opinion about SI	Q10: Assess your level of concern about each of the following topics: - Q10a: environmental scanning *[semantic scale]* - Q10b: information protection *[semantic scale]* - Q10c: influence and lobbying *[semantic scale]* Q11: Assess your level of command of each of the following topics: - Q11a: environmental scanning *[semantic scale]* - Q11b: information protection *[semantic scale]* - Q11c: influence and lobbying *[semantic scale]* Q12: Do you agree with the following statements? - Q12a: SI is only for big companies. *[Likert scale]* - Q12b: SI can help in defining strategic medium- and long-term goals. *[Likert scale]* - Q12c: SI is useful for the growth of your company. *[Likert scale]* - Q12d: SI might help to position your company against the competition. *[Likert scale]* - Q12e: SI is useful for international development. *[Likert scale]* Q20: Do you think that SI should be taught to future managers? *[yes / no / no opinion]*
Topic 5: SI practices	Q13: Which types of intelligence does your company do? *[Cite items, several answers accepted: Competitor intelligence / Client intelligence / Supplier intelligence / Technological intelligence, generally speaking / Patent intelligence / Brand intelligence / Political intelligence / Regulation intelligence / Public market intelligence / Others (which?) / None]*

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*).

	Q14: We are now going to talk about information search methods (for instance, the use of search engines, databases, specific software, libraries). Generally speaking, do you think that the use of these methods in your company, is *[very insufficient / insufficient / quite adequate / satisfying / very satisfying]*?
	Q15: How do you get information about your competitors? *[Cite items, several answers accepted: Internet / Clients / Suppliers / Sales force / External consultants / Others (which?) / Not applicable]*
	Q16a: Has your company faced a malicious attack? *[Yes / no / I don't know]*
	Q16b: If yes, of what nature? *[Cite items, several answers accepted: Data theft / Equipment / Material theft / Employee / Deception operation / Hacking / Other (which?)]*
	Q17: Have you ever called in external consultants in that field? *[yes / no]*
	Q18: I am now going to read you different statements about your company's influence. Tell me if you agree with them or not.
	Q18a: My company knows how to influence public opinion. *[Likert scale]*
	Q18b: My company contributes to the development of norms and regulations in our sector. *[Likert scale]*
	Q18c: My company uses the Internet to improve its reputation. *[Likert scale]*
	Q18d: My company is capable of reaching public decision-makers if needed. *[Likert scale]*
Topic 6: SI actors	Q19: As far as you know, who are the SI specialists in Wallonia? *[Open-ended question]*
Topic 7: Company and respondent identity	Q21: What is your position in your company? *[Open-ended question]*
	Q22: When was your company established? *[Open-ended question]*
	Q23: Which stage of the life cycle is your company in? *[Being set up or just set up / Development or growth / Handing over]*
	Q24: Sector? *[Open-ended question]*
	Q25: Is your company part of a corporate group?
	Q26: Turnover in 2009?
	Q27: In comparison with 2008, your 2009 turnover was *[More than 10% lower / Less than 10% lower / Stable / Less than 10% higher /More than 10% higher]*
	Q28: Your current clients' origin is mostly *[Regional / National / European / Worldwide]*
	Q29: In the medium term, your clients' origin will be *[Regional / National / European / Worldwide]*
	Q30: Percentage of export sales in your turnover?
	Q31: Are you a member of *[A professional federation / A Walloon cluster / A competitiveness cluster / A chamber of commerce / Union des Classes Moyennes / Union Wallonne des Entreprises / A social economy federation]*?
Topic 8: Interest in/intention for SI training	Q32: The ASE organises SI training sessions in your region. Would you like to receive more information about them? *[yes / no]*
	Q33: Would you be interested in pursuing more intensive and diploma SI training ? *[yes / no / don't know]*

Company, which is known as one of the most complete and up-to-date databases in Belgium. The target population consisted of Walloon SMEs employing between three and 250 employees, with the exception of companies belonging to sectors that are not eligible for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Only eligible companies can receive ASE support, precisely because the ASE's mission is to co-ordinate economic stimulation projects that are co-funded by ERDF and other European funds. In short, the surveyed companies belonged to the following sectors: manufacturing; wholesale trade; building and civil engineering; freight transport; B-to-B services; agriculture; forestry; and mining (for an exhaustive non-eligible sectors list, see Service Public de Wallonie, 2010). The targeted population represented a total of about 13,000 companies. Random sampling was used to select a sample of 1000 SMEs.

Phone survey software was used to select randomly the order of the phone calls. Telemarketers made the calls until 250 questionnaires were completed and usable (this number was chosen considering time, budget and representativeness issues). Only heads of SMEs or top managers were interviewed. The final error of margin was $\pm 6.1\%$ for a 95% confidence interval.

Sample profile

Of the respondents, 85% were very small companies (under 20 full-time equivalent employees). This is quite similar to the Walloon average of 79%. Due to the sampling choice, it is difficult to compare the sample structure in terms of sectors to the overall Walloon SME population. The construction sector made up 38% of respondents; this sector is indeed the largest among Walloon SMEs (Agence Wallonne des Télécommunications, 2007). The remaining sectors broke down as follows: 23% of respondents belonged to the manufacturing sector, 17% to the service industry (mainly business to business (B-to-B) services), 12% wholesalers, 5% transport-related companies and 5% agriculture, forestry or mining firms.

A full 81% of respondents said that their clients are mainly national or regional; 71% thought that their clientele would not change in the future. A chi-square test clearly indicates that this result is not simply a sector effect due to the high proportion of construction companies.

Results

SI awareness

The concept of SI was unfamiliar to 66% of respondents, independent of their size. In our sample, medium firms (under 20 employees) were not more aware of SI than were very small ones. Only 20% spontaneously associated SI with the word 'strategy', while 6% thought of 'environmental scanning', 4% of 'anticipation' and 2.8% of 'information seeking'. Only one firm associated SI with protection, and none with influence or lobbying, the two other SI pillars. In short, Walloon SMEs did not understand the concept of SI, and a full 93% of them were unable to name a single SI Walloon specialist.

Importance of SI

After having heard a short explanation of SI (the 'three pillars' definition), SMEs had a globally positive understanding of the concept. A majority of 70.3% (fully or mostly) agreed that SI is useful for the growth of a company (14.1% disagreed), 66% thought that

SI can help in defining strategic medium- and long-term goals (10.9% disagreed), and 63.7% assumed that it helps to position the company against competition (14.5% did not). However, most respondents were not convinced that it is useful for international development (only 47.4% agreed with the statement).

Belief about own practices

A large proportion, 86%, of Walloon SMEs think they understand their clients' needs well or very well, and 67% are confident in their knowledge of their prospects' needs. SMEs' self-confidence is somewhat lower, but still significant, concerning other parts of their environment: 71.5% think they manage to stay informed about their current or potential suppliers quite or very easily (for 6% it is quite or very difficult); 68.5% think they manage to stay informed about technologies and production methods useful to the company quite or very easily (for 10.3% it is quite or very difficult).

However, SMEs recognise that it can be difficult to stay informed about regulations (48% said quite or very easily vs. 30.6% quite or very difficult) and competitors: 44.3% thought they managed to stay informed about their Belgian competitors quite or very easily (vs. 21% who said quite or very difficult), whereas only 24.5% thought they got information about their foreign competitors quite or very easily (vs. 51.1% quite or very difficult).

A substantial majority of 83% are satisfied or very satisfied with their information-seeking methods. But when asked to self-evaluate their SI skills, only 39.3% thought they had a (very or quite) good level of command of environmental scanning (21.5% a bad or very bad level). This is a first sign of the gap between the self-confidence shown in their previous declarations and their practices.

Practices

Looking more closely at the behaviour of SMEs, results show that only 48% watch their clients, 37% their competitors and 26% their suppliers. Only 25% do general technological intelligence, while 22% do legal intelligence. Brand and patent intelligence is practised by less than 7% of SMEs. No sector effect was detected (industrial firms might have been more attentive to patents, for instance, but that was not the case). In short, they practise little or no environmental scanning. The same types of results are found concerning the other SI pillars (protection and influence). Less than half the firms said they have an influence on public opinion, public decision-makers or norms. Only 17% had already obtained external help to protect information.

Walloon SMEs scarcely use the usual intelligence sources: in decreasing order, 36% use the Internet, 28% their clients, 22% their suppliers, 17% word-of-mouth and 11% their sales force and so on, while only 5% search in legal publications and 2% use trade shows. None of them mentioned spying.

Another interesting finding is that only 32% of SMEs approach new markets by seeking out a new opportunity, and 8% in reaction to a competitor's move. Most of them simply respond to their clients' needs (66%).

SMEs and SI programmes

Respondents showed interest in SI: 64.4% thought that SI should be taught to future managers, and 60.4% asked for more information about ASE training sessions. As many as 20.8% would be interested in pursuing intensive training to qualify in SI.

Feelings about SI

SMEs are moderately concerned by SI: 41.16% feel (very or rather) concerned about environmental scanning (29.7% don't); 44.6% feel (very or rather) worried about information protection (34.9% don't); and 35% only feel (very or rather) concerned about influence and lobbying (39.5% don't). However, they do not consider SI to be a practice for 'big companies only' (53.1% disagree with this idea vs. 32.9% who agree).

Quite surprisingly, not a single Walloon SME associated SI with espionage, economic patriotism or any other practice that could frighten a small business away from SI.

Discussion, research and managerial implications

A synthesis of results using the tri-component framework is presented in Table 2. One can hardly say that Walloon SMEs have a negative attitude towards SI or SI programmes, but some issues might be challenging for the ASE.

Wallonia, a virgin territory for SI

The Walloon SMEs' ignorance of the SI concept is remarkably high, compared to the 53% calculated by Larivet (2004) in France 10 years ago, when SI public programmes were beginning there. The spontaneous association with strategy by (only) 20% of respondents might be tautological reasoning. However, this lack of knowledge of the concept might be considered a threat to the ASE programme. To avoid the Canadian pitfall in regional programmes identified by Bergeron (2000) in a lack of awareness campaigns, the ASE

Table 2.   Walloon SMEs' attitude and intention to follow a SI programme.

Attitude	Threats to SI programme	Opportunities for SI programme
Cognitive	- 66% of SMEs don't know what SI is - 93% of SMEs don't know a single SI actor - SI importance for international development is not recognised - SMEs think they are well informed about clients, suppliers, technologies and production methods - SMES are satisfied with their information-seeking methods - SMEs are not conscious of their needs	- SI importance is recognised for growth, facing the competition & defining goals - SMEs don't think it is easy to stay informed about competitors and regulation evolutions - SMEs think they have an average level of SI - SMEs think SI should be taught to future managers
Affective		- SI is not associated with economic espionage (no fear) - SI is not associated with big companies (no reluctance)
	- SME moderately worried by SI questions (self-confidence)	
Behavioural	- SMEs have primarily Belgian clients and don't foresee (want?) any change - SMEs are mostly passive	- SMEs don't practise SI or even environmental scanning - SMEs don't use many of the usual intelligence sources - SMEs asked to receive more information about SI training sessions
Intention	About 1/5 interested in pursuing a training session leading to a diploma	

should consider a campaign of mass communication of the concept to make it more familiar to SMEs.

More worrying is the abysmal ignorance of the existence of local SI operators, which confirms previous statements about the lack of knowledge of SI programmes (Bergeron, 2000). There should be local communication campaigns by each actor to explain its SI role. Unlike in France, all of the Walloon SI operators have different names (BEP, SPI +, CCI, IDELUX, IDETA) and various legal statuses, which make them more difficult to identify. In this case, the ASE might try to appear as a one-stop SI service and communicate in its own name. A kind of SI brand or label could also be useful to unify the SI actors' publicity.

However, the poor SI awareness is not entirely negative. On the contrary, the fact that SMEs have no prejudice against SI might help the ASE to develop a more positive initial SI perception than, for example, this perception had been in France. Wallonia is a virgin territory for SI.

An overall positive attitude

It is tempting to use a review of Table 2 to make a final assessment of Walloon attitude and intention to participate in an ASE programme. An overview would indicate that the global attitude is quite good and that the ASE can easily reduce many of the threats. Communication, education initiatives and testimonies of previously trained (and satisfied) SMEs would help other SMEs to become more conscious of the room for progress and could have an effect on threatening cognitive items.

Affective threats are not salient, even if the size of the company was also found to be related to SI worries (chi-square test). Even if they were no more aware of the SI concept than were smaller firms, companies over 20 employees reported worrying more about it. This result is a step in the direction of previous qualitative findings about 20 employees being a 'pivotal size in terms of SME manager involvement' (Smith et al., 2010, p. 534). The ASE could take this pivotal size into account and target companies over 20 employees.

Concerning the behavioural dimension, the fact that SMEs do not currently practise SI is the justification for the ASE programmes. In fact, the intention to participate is not as low as expected, considering the results of Bergeron (2000). The demand for more information is encouraging: a full one-fifth of respondents have the intention to participate in a qualifying programme. Even if the links between attitude, intention and behaviour are not that simple, these positive signs are encouraging.

Of more concern are the two behavioural threats that have been identified. One is that Walloon SMEs are not willing to grow outside their borders, which could be a problem, considering the very small size of the internal Walloon or even Belgian market and the economic situation the country is facing. The other one is the passivity of some Walloon SMEs: they choose just to follow their clients and rarely react to the competition. These SMEs belong to the 'immune/passive' categories identified by Rouach and Santi (2001) and Wright et al. (2002). Far beyond the issue of SI, this problem raises strategic questions as well as questions of strategy (strategic autonomy, strategic culture, etc.).

Unconscious needs, practice and measurement problems

A final examination of Table 2 shows that, generally speaking, SMEs have environmental scanning or SI practices that lack consistency with their self-confidence about their level of

information. The intuition of Salles (2001) about 'aberrations' in terms of SMEs' SI needs is confirmed. It seems almost as if these firms are unconscious of their needs. Given their ignorance about SI, it becomes very difficult to question them directly about their expectations, needs or even attitude towards SI.

SI attitude or behaviour measurement problems are not new (Brouard, 2006; Larivet, 2004; Wright & Callof, 2006), but they are particularly crucial in a small business context. SMEs' ignorance of SI terminology and informal practices are two of the main reasons why such substantial size effects are found when examining SI practices (Larivet, 2009). This bias is too often ignored. In most countries, it is almost impossible to use direct measures with SMEs; if at all, they must be done very carefully. Some attempts to confront these difficulties have been made by using indirect measures and scales (Larivet, 2004; Wright & Calof, 2006), or by using 'informed informants', to paraphrase Ganesh, Miree, and Prescott (2003, quoted by Smith et al., 2010). The solution definitely does not lie in rejecting from the samples the decision-makers who are unable to answer survey questions (Koseoglu et al., 2011), but in working harder on building good measurement instruments specifically dedicated to SMEs.

Wright and Calof (2006) are right to suggest the use of other fields' tools and to ask for more studies about 'how' CI is practised. However, their claim should not be understood as putting a stop to 'whether' (SI is practised) studies, but rather encouraging researchers to design them better. In the case of small businesses at least, the measurement of 'whether' is deeply linked to the measurement of 'how' something is concretely done (Brouard, 2006). For instance, looking for a formalised CI organisation in a small business would probably lead to the conclusion that the firm is not CI oriented, which might in fact be false. 'Whether' and 'how' are not opposing concepts but in fact complete each other.

Conclusion

This research has limitations, mainly typical of 'engaged research' constraints: it is descriptive, it is exploratory regarding its theoretical framework, the sample only takes into account sectors eligible for ASE support and the margin of error could be improved by interviewing more companies.

However, even taking these limitations into account, this survey answers a certain number of questions about Walloon SMEs' attitudes. It shows their lack of awareness concerning SI and SI programmes but reveals that the concept has not been contaminated by the French prejudice about espionage and has (when explained) a quite positive image. It also reveals a gap between the quite high level of confidence that SMEs have in their information level and their concrete intelligence practices. It would seem that SMEs are unsure of their needs or the opportunities that SI practice could open for them. At the same time, there seems to be some demand for information and training sessions. Furthermore, making SMEs aware of the usefulness of SI does not necessarily mean they will engage in SI if they lack the resources for it.

Finally, the exploratory use of the tri-component view of attitude reveals that it is a promising concept for future research. As already suggested by Smith et al. (2010), a deeper investigation into the theories and constructs surrounding attitude should help researchers to develop solid theoretical foundations for CI research.

References

Agence de Stimulation Économique. (no date a). *Origine de l'Intelligence Stratégique* [Origin of Strategic Intelligence]. Retrieved from http://www.intelligencestrategique.be/site/ase_is-fr/intelligence-strategique/origine-de-l-intelligence-strategique.html

Agence de Stimulation Économique. (no date b). *Les piliers de l'Intelligence Stratégique* [Strategic Intelligence pillars]. Retrieved from http://www.intelligencestrategique.be/site/ase_is-fr/intelligence-strategique/les-piliers-de-l-intelligence-strategique/index.html

Agence Wallonne des Télécommunications. (2007). *PME wallonnes: Usages TIC 2006* [Walloon SMEs: ICT uses 2006]. Retrieved from http://www.awt.be/web/dem/index.aspx?page=dem,fr,pme,010,002

Ajzen, I. (2005). *Attitudes, personality, and behavior* (2nd ed.). Milton-Keynes: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.

Bergeron, P (2000). *Veille stratégique et PME: Comparaison des politiques gouvernementales de soutien* [Competitive Intelligence and SMEs: A comparison between governmental support policies]. Sainte-Foy: Presses Universitaires du Québec.

Brouard, F. (2006). Development of an expert system on environmental scanning practices in SME: Tools as a research program. *Journal of Competitive Intelligence and Management*, *3*(4), 37–58.

Bulinge, F. (2001, October 2). *PME-PMI et intelligence compétitive: les difficultiés d'un mariage de raison* [SMEs and competitive intelligence: Difficulties of a marriage in name only]. Proceedings of Veille Stratégique Scientifique & Technologique Conference, Barcelona, pp. 245–256.

Bulinge, F. (2002). *Pour une culture de l'information dans les petites et moyennes organisations: Un modèle incrémental d'intelligence économique* [In favour of an information culture in small and medium businesses: An incremental model of Economic Intelligence] (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from http://www.veille.com/ie/publications/these_franck_bulinge.pdf

Burt, R.S. (2005). *Brokerage and closure: An introduction to social capital*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.

Clerc, P. (1995). Intelligence économique et stratégie [Economic Intelligence and strategy]. In *Encyclopedia Universalis* (pp. 194–197). Paris: Universalia.

Commissariat Général du Plan. (1994). *Intelligence économique et stratégie des entreprises* [Economic Intelligence and firms' strategies]. Paris: La Documentation Française.

De Pelsmacker, P.J., Muller, M.-L., Viviers, W., Saayman, A., Cuyvers, L., & Jegers, M. (2005). Competitive intelligence practices of South African and Belgian exporters. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *23*, 606–620.

Economist Intelligence Unit. (2010, February). *Financial services industry report: Belgium*. Retrieved from the Business Source Complete database, http://www.eiu.com/

Groom, J., & David, F. (2001). Competitive activity among small firms. *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, *66*, 12–20.

Harbulot, C. (1995). *La machine de guerre économique: Etats-Unis, Japon, Europe* [The economic warfare machine: United States, Japan, Europe]. Paris: Economica.

Institut Wallon de l'Evaluation, de la Prospective et de la Statistique. (2011). *PIB volume* [GDP volume]. Retrieved from http://themes.iweps.be/content/Indicator_2094/

International Monetary Fund. (2010). *World economic outlook database*. Retrieved from http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2011/01/weodata/index.aspx

Koseoglu, M.A., Karayormuk, K., Parnell, J.A., & Menefee, M.L. (2011). Competitive Intelligence: Evidence from Turkish SMEs. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, *13*, 333–349.

Larivet, S. (2004). Les manifestations de l'intelligence économique en PME [Economic Intelligence manifestations in SMEs]. In A. Guilhon (Ed.), *L'intelligence économique dans la PME* [Economic Intelligence in SMEs] (pp. 129–148). Paris: L'Harmattan.

Larivet, S. (2009). *L'intelligence économique: Enquête dans 100 PME* [Economic Intelligence: A survey in 100 SMEs]. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Levet, J.-L., & Paturel, R. (1996, May). *L'intégration de la démarche d'intelligence économique dans le management stratégique* [The integration of the Economic Intelligence process into strategic management]. Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Strategic Management, Lille [CD-Rom].

Madinier, H. (2007). Quelle veille stratégique pour les PME de Suisse romande? [Which Competitive Intelligence for French-speaking Switzerland?]. *Documentaliste – Sciences de l'Information*, *44*, 300–310.

Pettigrew, A.M. (2001). Management research after modernism. *British Journal of Management*, *12*, S61–S70.

Phanuel, D., & Levy, D. (2002, June). *Intelligence économique ou économie d'intelligence dans les PME-PMI? L'exemple d'un département français* [Economic Intelligence or economy of intelligence? The example of a French department]. Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Strategic Management, Paris [CD-Rom].

Rosenberg, M.J., & Hovland, C.I. (1960). Cognitive, affective, and behavioural components of attitudes. In C.I. Hovland & M.J. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Attitude organisation and change: An analysis of consistency among attitude components* (pp. 1–14). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rouach, D., & Santi, P. (2001). Competitive Intelligence adds value: Five intelligence attitudes. *European Management Journal*, *19*, 552–559.

Saayman, A., Pienaar, J., de Pelsmacker, P.J., Viviers, W., Cuyvers, L., Muller, M.-L., & Jegers, M. (2008). Competitive Intelligence: Construct exploration, validation and equivalence. *Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives*, *60*, 383–411.

Salles, M. (2001, October). *Les besoins des PME en information d'Intelligence Economique: Présentation des résultats d'une enquête en Midi-Pyrénées* [SMEs' needs for information from Economic Intelligence: Presentation of the results of a survey in Midi-Pyrénées]. Proceedings of the Third Veille Stratégique Scientifique & Technologique Conference, Barcelona. Retrieved from http://ieut1.irit.fr/publications/Les_besoins_des_PME_en_information.pdf

Service Public de Wallonie. (2010, October). *Aide à l'investissement: Brochure d'information & notice explicative des formulaires de demande d'intervention* [Investment support: Information booklet and explanatory notice about intervention demand form]. Retrieved from http://formulaires.wallonie.be/Formulaires/NoticeAideInvestissement.pdf

Smith, J.R., Wright, S., & Pickton, D. (2010). Competitive Intelligence programmes for SMEs in France: Evidence of changing attitudes. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *18*, 523–536.

Smith, J.R., Wright, S., & Pickton, D. (2011, July). *Competitive Intelligence effectiveness, terminology, and attitudes: Does size matter?* Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Conference, Liverpool. Retrieved from https://marketing.conference-services.net/resources/327/2342/pdf/AM2011_0263.pdf

Tarraf, P., & Molz, R. (2006). Competitive Intelligence at small enterprises. *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, *71*(4), 24–34.

Van de Ven, A.H. (2007). *Engaged scholarship: A guide to organizational and social research*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press.

Wright, S., Bisson, C., & Duffy, A. (2011, July). *A behavioural and operational typology of Competitive Intelligence practices in Turkish SMEs*. Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Conference, Liverpool. Retrieved from https://marketing.conference-services.net/resources/327/2342/pdf/AM2011_0308.pdf

Wright, S., & Calof, J.L. (2006). The quest for competitive, business and marketing intelligence: A country comparison of current practices. *European Journal of Marketing*, *40*, 453–465.

Wright, S., & Pickton, D. (1998, November). *Improved competitive strategy through value added Competitive Intelligence*. Proceedings of the Third Annual Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals European Conference, Berlin, pp. 73–83.

Wright, S., Pickton, D.W., & Callow, J. (2002). Competitive Intelligence in UK firms: A typology. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *20*, 349–360.