Developing Tomorrow's Intelligence Analyst:
A New Plan for High Performance in the Intelligence Community

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From warfighters on the front lines to policymakers on Capitol Hill, people depend on the intelligence community to protect national security interests. The intelligence community faces an incredible and increasingly complex challenge in bringing this information to practical application. Quantity, sources and types of information are exploding. To date, the traditional response to improving intelligence effectiveness has been to turn to technology. The intelligence community spends hundreds of millions of dollars on technology integration services, satellite equipment and new technologies in areas related to knowledge discovery, data mining and collaboration.

But now, perhaps more than ever, intelligence agencies have a special obligation to operate with leanness, efficiency and high accuracy, so that every dollar possible can be directed to support missions on the ground. As the United States' economic squeeze grows tighter, the imperative to work smarter and achieve better outcomes with fewer resources grows.

Certainly, the call for a different approach—one that acknowledges the limits of technology and of the ability to spend on technology—seems clear. In any case, technology is only one part of the intelligence picture: potentially, the smaller part. The intelligence community can collect all the data in the world and it will only ever be as useful as the people charged with analyzing and disseminating it can make it. Viewed in this context, the real "capital" of the intelligence community is its people—in particular, the all-source intelligence analysts who pull information together from multiple contexts and make sense of it, quickly and accurately, so that those who must take action have the highest likelihood of taking the appropriate action.

Extensive research has made clear the linkages between talent management and high performance: for example, we have found that executives who manage high-performance organizations view their talent strategies as a top priority in sustaining the superior performance of their organizations and that truly talent-powered organizations are adept at defining talent needs, discovering diverse sources of talent, developing individual and collective talents, and deploying talent in ways that align people with strategic objectives. However, our research also has found that although having the right talent both aligned and engaged is crucial to achieving strategic objectives, fragmented talent management systems, processes and practices are still the norm at too many organizations.[1]

These points are as true in the intelligence community as they are elsewhere. As the intelligence community looks toward a new future of higher performance, it must first turn its attention to developing and nurturing its human resources, a fundamentally more effective and cost-effective approach than seeking salvation in technology. The intelligence community needs a new strategy for human capital development—one that begins with a vision of a new type of intelligence analysts and continues with a logical plan for turning its workforce into a group of collaborative

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[1] _The Talent Powered Organization: Strategies for Globalization, Talent Management and High Performance_ (Cheese, Thomas, Craig, 2008).

individuals who provide ever greater value by knowing how to tame overwhelming data streams and being unafraid to assert their well-founded opinions.

A New Breed of Intelligence Analyst
Today's information analyst typically comes from a liberal arts background. In university they may have majored in history, political science, language or international studies and enter the intelligence community with limited experience manipulating multiple streams of data and limited exposure to the technologies that can do much of the "heavy lifting" for them.

But the fact is the needs of the intelligence community demands a different and changing skill set. The ability to access and manipulate information is so important to intelligence analysts in today's world, that deficiencies in this area must be addressed right away. Too much of potentially available intelligence remains unseen because it remains impenetrable to analysts who lack the technology savvy to translate important data into meaningful and actionable information.

Technology competency is a major differentiator between elite and average analysts. The top performers are the tech savvy: They know how to use automated tools; they know how to set up and run the best queries; they can manipulate information really well. The intelligence community has the responsibility for nurturing their analysts: getting them to embrace technology and bring what they know and what's in their head to a problem set that can be cracked open with the help of smart technology tools. Training analysts to use already available technology to better massage, intelligently search, interpret, and use the resulting information to get good analysis to users should be priority one for the intelligence community.

One potential idea in this regard is a variation on the software engineering concept of "extreme programming," in which two people work side-by-side at a computer programming as a team for faster and better results. In the intelligence community this concept would translate into pairing two or three intelligence analysts with a technologist who could help them get the information they need to get their jobs done. While the initial costs may be somewhat high, the concept would pay dividends in higher quality intelligence and eventually, as the analysts learned to successfully use the technology to manipulate the data themselves.

From News Reporters to Pundits
The second change the intelligence agencies need to encourage is for its analysts to start making more aggressive assertions. Currently the intelligence community does not train its analysts to "go out on a limb" and give an opinion. Instead, analysts too often fall into the habit of caveats and hedging their assertions, profoundly diluting value to the intelligence consumer in the process.

For example, an analyst simply saying "How this particular foreign government will react depends on these six factors," and then listing the factors, is not nearly as helpful as an analyst saying for each of those six variables, "If X happens, then the foreign government will do this, but if Y happens, then the government will react this way." The job of the analyst is not merely to go out and find and assemble information; analysts need to make hypotheses and assertions—to give educated opinions on the likelihood of different scenarios and outcomes.

Getting analysts to take the leap will require some fundamental changes in the culture of the intelligence community. Right now, analysts are afraid of being wrong: they fear punishment if people take the wrong action based on the information they provide—even if their original assertion is made logically, on the basis of seemingly solid information. Likewise, intelligence

consumers have not been conditioned to push back—to ask for those assertions rather than accepting information without an overlay of analysis on top of it.

Even before training people to think about and present intelligence differently, however, intelligence agencies need to define a community-wide standard of what analysis actually is—to formally agree on the differences between search and research (filtering data to establish facts, trends and patterns) and analysis (sifting through the research to determine its implications within a specific context). Defining an intelligence analyst "competency framework" will then serve as an anchor to any subsequent talent development and management program.

Rethinking Job-Level Training
Once the intelligence community has established a vision of the types of skills and work habits it wants its analysts to exhibit, it will need a new plan for developing these skills and habits in its employees.

The jobs analysts do widely differ and intelligence community training needs to be restructured to become more specialized. For example, even among a group of all-source analysts, there will be individuals who focus more on strategy and others who focus more on tactics. There will be analysts who do high-value individual targeting (using human intelligence, signals intelligence and so on to find the people who are financing and leading enemy operations). There will be indications and warnings individuals, who identify events as they happen and put together plans of immediate action. There will be geopolitical strategic analysts who will study the relationships between individual nations and make predictions on the influence their likely actions will have on the rest of the world in terms of trade, military action and so on.

These are just a few examples. What they all point to, however, is the need for training that goes far beyond lectures and Powerpoints to large groups of individuals. The common training approach within the intelligence community today is a model of "buttonology": characterized by a passive syllabus, slide shows, readings or multimedia presentations, and ultimately, limited interaction. While a starting point, the buttonology approach will never provide a complete foundation for a quality analyst education.

Even if you only had two analysts doing different jobs you could not truly teach them analytical effectiveness in a classroom. Formal learning is most useful at building lower levels of proficiency, while job experience, active collaboration with other practitioners, and teaching others is more effective for building higher levels of proficiency. Intelligence training has to be hands-on and contextually relevant to the analyst—in the form of all-day scenario training, for example, that mixes theory, tools-of-the-trade and practical exercises.

An Intelligence Community University
To make this new model of individualized analyst training meet requirements of scale, the intelligence community should consider implementing an "Intelligence Community University." In it, rather than each organization having its own training, agencies would tap into a formalized community-wide training program and a single set of curricula.

As intelligence people from different agencies come together to work on specific threats, they may have trouble collaborating because they have not all been trained in the same way. An intelligence community university not only would standardize training and skills, but it also would allow intelligence individuals from different organizations to begin to build valuable networks across participating agencies.

Analyst training and development is not a one-time event. It is a continuous process that occurs both formally and informally to eventually create a culture of collaboration and continuous learning. As individuals, we learn best from one another, and one of the best ways to encourage a culture of collaboration and knowledge-sharing is through the common experience that an intelligence community university would provide.

Measuring Accuracy for Improvement
Finally, in addition to specialized and ongoing training, intelligence analysts need the structure of a more formal feedback loop. Measuring the accuracy of an individual's analysis is a fairly straightforward task, yet it typically does not happen enough. A feedback loop gives analysts a starting point for improvement; after all, how can anyone improve without knowing how they are doing in the first place? Finding out that they have been inaccurate encourages analysts to put more self-scrutiny on their own analytical skills and future judgments.

Along with this recommendation, however, it is important to understand the possible unintended consequences—the objective of measuring accuracy is not to punish. This point goes hand-in-hand with creating a culture where intelligence analysts do not fear retribution if they do due diligence, make a reasonable assertion and unfortunately get it wrong. Measuring accuracy must be done for two reasons: people will improve when they are measured and top performance can be rewarded accordingly.

Conclusion
As the intelligence community looks to a future in which better intelligence decisions emerge from smarter use of available (but limited) resources, human capital must take center stage. The inclusion of culture, values, education, and life-long learning all provide the right ingredients to evolve the intelligence community to the next level of a learning organization—and to achieve outcomes of high performance for the missions they support.

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Author Biography

Chris Zinner is a senior manager with Accenture's Public Service Operating Group and is based in Washington, D.C. Mr. Zinner has been with Accenture for more than ten years, beginning his career in San Francisco in August 1998 as part of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Service Line. Four year ago, Mr. Zinner rejoined the U.S. Army for one year, during which time he was deployed to Iraq as an Intelligence Analyst. As a solution architect, Mr. Zinner has extensive experience in semantic web, knowledge management, customer relationship management, data modeling, and systems integration, as well as experience working with many commercial off the shelf (COTS) business applications.