

OUTREACH FOR INSIGHT: LESSONS FROM BUSINESS FOR THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

By Doug Randall

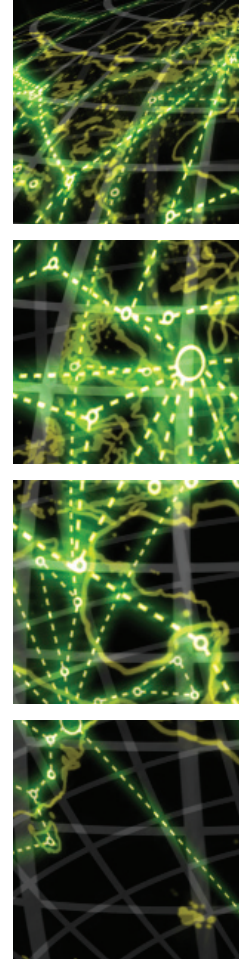
We live in a world in which the volume, velocity, and variety of data available has increased exponentially. An avalanche of information—much of it transmitted digitally—now demands to be understood.

Intelligence gathering and analysis have always depended to a significant degree on secret information. As analysts search for hard-to-get facts and meaning, they want to know absolutely everything they can about every country and issue in the world: the thinking of senior leaders, the mood of people on the streets, the military profile, the economic picture — absolutely everything.

The problem is that this goal of perfect and complete information has always been impossible. And it is only getting more difficult, because there's just too much information and too many adversaries. How do you know which information to pay attention to?

Analysts can follow the issues that matter most in this exact moment, but the present is an imperfect and instantly outdated means of assessing the strategic threats and opportunities you face. To know where to focus, you need to know what's going to change, what's going to matter, and what you can have an impact on. Tackling these looming issues is difficult because there are often no right or wrong answers. It requires judgment, experience, and the ability to see patterns and trends across events, countries, industries, groups, issues, and time periods.

YOU CAN'T SEARCH FOR INSIGHT THE SAME WAY YOU SEARCH FOR FACTS. IT CAN'T BE PRODUCED IN A SIMPLE REPORT, AND NO SINGLE INDIVIDUAL CAN PROVIDE ENOUGH BACKGROUND TO GENERATE INSIGHT.





In a data-deluged world, you need something extra: insight. Insight is what helps analysts understand certain types of complex intelligence problems, such as predicting the actions of terrorist networks, imagining the next-order impacts of wars and natural disasters, and foreseeing the evolution of environmental trends like climate change. The chaotic nature of today's problems that analysts face is compounded by the fact that they are increasingly transnational and multilayered, which requires approaches that go beyond simply looking at the objective facts.

You can't search for insight the same way you search for facts. It can't be produced in a simple report, and no single individual can provide enough background to generate insight. Getting the facts, without the added step of filtering them through the judgment and experience of *multiple* people, is insufficient in today's threat environment.

OUTREACH IN ACTION

Through outreach, you gain information from a network of people outside your immediate circle and internal organization. Monitor has found over time that going to a multidisciplinary network of people in specific ways can help you understand and make sense of what's happening today and the ways in which emerging geopolitical and national security issues might unfold in the future. While there are many research tools and databases for accessing factual information, there's also an important human quality that's intangible and can't be computerized. Incorporating that subtle human quality through diversity of thought can help you find important meaning in facts, and this strategy has surprisingly low-cost, high-quality results.

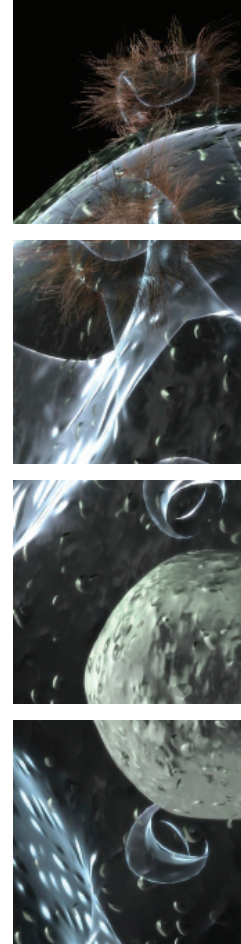
▶ For example, to increase an intelligence agency's understanding of the future of Latin America, Monitor brought together academics who study the role of religion, family dynamics, and gender in the region's art, culture, and politics; a film critic who explores the intersection of film, politics, and society in the region; and the editor of a major U.S. policy journal to explore the role of the black-market economy. Intelligence analysts gained fresh insights and a more nuanced understanding of the threats and opportunities within the region – cultural insights

that don't come from the typical forms of analysis. These structured conversations with people outside the classified world helped analysts see that looking through a frame of nation states could limit visibility into the significant actions of nonstate actors, grassroots organizations, and others.

► Monitor also brought in advisors to help the intelligence community examine the future of borders. Epidemiologists routinely deal with diseases that move through completely permeable borders: diseases don't stop for a passport check before infecting the next person. It turns out that the ways epidemiologists manage an outbreak may be similar to the ways governments want to manage elements of their borders: they figure out which elements of the border are porous, and which are not. This perspective helped intelligence analysts see that borders are not simply lines on a map that can be controlled through barriers and border guards, but rather are complex systems that need to be seen through a variety of alternative frames. People and goods will slip through, and that needs to be managed, too.

► In addition, we brought in people involved with the alternative art festival Burning Man in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. The organizers of the 22-year-old festival have become skilled at creating rules and regulations for short periods of time that govern the anarchic temporary community that forms each year in the desert. They've created a voluntary border with a voluntary set of rules that are counterintuitive but are completely enforced from the inside. We uncovered lessons from that context that could be useful to someone managing borders. Analysts considered what it meant to have borders managed not through strict enforcers or armed patrols, but through the creation of a set of values and norms that the community itself enforces.

In the examples above, different forms of outreach were used to tackle intelligence problems differently. In the first example, Subject Matter Experts were brought together to look at different dimensions of Latin America using innovative group processes. In looking at borders, the epidemiologists and Burning Man organizers were used to study how parallel problems were addressed by others. What made





these examples of outreach successful was more than just having smart or knowledgeable people involved. It was also the mix of people selected to participate in the analysis, the specific contributions they were asked to make, and the way their participation was orchestrated.

By advocating outreach to improve analyst insight, we're not suggesting that the intelligence community should stop looking for secret data. It's not either/or: you need both secret information and outreach. Consulting with a multidisciplinary network is a venue for gaining meaningful insight into analysis. Increasingly, outreach is a critical facet of the analytic mind.

THE CHALLENGES OF GENERATING INSIGHT IN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

Smart analysts know that they aren't always getting the information they need to sort through complex issues simply from the databases to which they have access. That's why the intelligence community is increasingly adding a more aggressive approach to outreach to its collection and analysis toolkit. In fact, the Director of National Intelligence recently issued Directive 205 which calls for more analytic outreach to "support, enrich, and improve analysis.

In a recent briefing to Congress about the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of climate change and U.S. national security, Dr. Thomas Fingar, deputy director of national intelligence for analysis and chairman of the National Intelligence Council, said that the estimate used "a fundamentally different kind of analytical methodology. We depended upon open sources and greatly leveraged outside expertise."¹ In researching the climate change NIE, the government consulted both government and private experts, including such organizations as the Joint Global Change Research Institute — a joint research program between the University of Maryland and the Pacific North-

¹ Testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, Thomas Fingar, June 25, 2008.

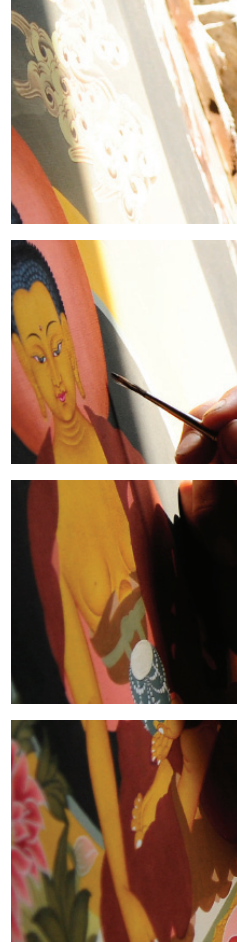
west National Laboratory — and Columbia University’s Center for International Earth Science Information Network. This has been cited as the first example of an intelligence estimate that was primarily open-source.

Intelligence analysts aren’t the only ones using outreach extensively. The Pentagon has started an ambitious program called Minerva to recruit social scientists and direct the nation’s brainpower to combating security threats like the Chinese military, Iraq, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism.²

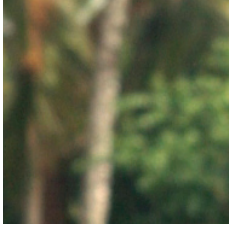
But so far these experiments have been limited in their impact on traditional analytical methods. More important, analysts have not always conducted outreach that can systematically or sustainably produce deep insights, or have not meaningfully connected outreach to the existing analytic process.

If analysts are thinking about reaching out to an artist, they might invite her to give a presentation at a workshop. But when the artist discusses Picasso’s Blue Period between 1900 and 1904, a topic completely unrelated to their need, analysts might dismiss her talk afterward as a waste of time. But the more appropriate indictment is that they simply didn’t use the artist properly. Rather than expound on her narrow subject expertise, the artist might have been useful in helping analysts understand the cultural and historical context of a particular country, the ways individuals in a society think about creativity and innovation, or perhaps the freedom citizens have to express their views. These open-source observations, when combined with those from experts from other fields, can yield unique clues to emerging geopolitical transformations.

IT’S NOT EITHER/OR:
YOU NEED BOTH
SECRET INFORMATION
AND OUTREACH



² http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/18/arts/18minerva.html?_r=2&th&cmc=th&coref=slogin&cor



Another challenge is that analysts may not know how to connect unclassified insights to classified information, because the community typically lives and breathes mostly secret data. They are generally looking at outreach through the same lens as they view collecting classified data. But the problems and solutions that the intelligence community needs to understand are not exclusively in the classified domain.

Generating insight from outreach is hard because it isn't always clear which insights you're looking for and how outreach can help. It's the problem of not knowing what you don't know. For example, when you're trying to find out where a particular country is moving its troops, it may be painstaking information to obtain, but there's a lot of clarity about what you're looking for, how to get it, and when you have the information you need.

On the other hand, when you're trying to understand how nonstate actors are organizing themselves and what their interests are regarding the United States, you probably won't even know ahead of time what you're looking for. You may or may not even know when you have the right information.

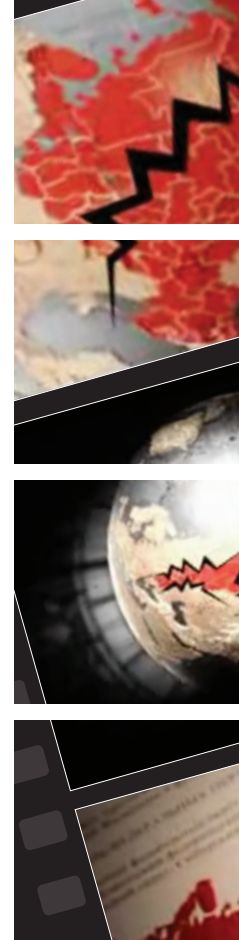
It's also complicated to measure the impact of good outreach. You can't use traditional metrics, such as your success in finding weapons of mass destruction. How do you measure the impact of something that didn't happen because your plan effectively changed the trajectory of events?

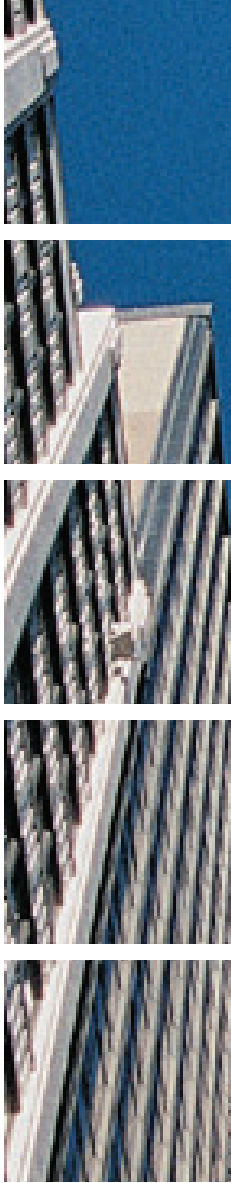
▶ Complex situations require much more judgment than facts. And just because applying judgment is more complicated and more difficult from an analyst perspective doesn't mean that it's not the most important thing to do. Instead of being measurable through traditional metrics, outreach is meant to produce less tangible, but equally important goals, such as helping analysts ask better questions, informing their perspective, and developing better judgment.

Monitor's extensive work in this area has shown that the intelligence community has the capacity to operate differently. For example, we worked with a group of analysts who were responsible for examining videos posted on Web sites, such as terrorist propaganda, to understand their national security implications. The number of threats analysts were facing, and the number of video-producing organizations they needed to track, were growing rapidly. And the sophistication level of the video these organizations produced, fueled by increasing ease of use, was dramatically increasing the ability of individuals and groups to communicate their messages persuasively.

This group of analysts asked Monitor to help them develop a scalable methodology for analyzing video that would improve their visual literacy skills. We started by researching how analysts currently looked at video. We found there were some "gurus" in the organization who were extremely proficient at analyzing video, but it was difficult for them to articulate how they did what they did so well. This organization was grappling with a set of challenges that others outside the intelligence community face as well. We spoke with advertisers, movie makers, media analysts, neuroscientists, professors, and other experts who studied political campaigns and the history of propaganda, all of whom think about persuasive video. All these people told us their processes for creating or deconstructing persuasive media and what they were trying to accomplish.

We took all of the information we gathered and presented it to a multidisciplinary group in a series of workshops that we convened. We got analysts together with people from creative, academic, and scientific fields, then together formulated a step-by-step methodology for effective video analysis that listed all the technical and content dimensions associated with persuasive video. And we came up with a set of frameworks that allowed the government to analyze video in a replicable way. Many analysts are now using this simple methodology, and they report that they finally have structure for their analysis and a cleaner way of doing things. Thoughtful and targeted outreach was a critical and necessary ingredient to that outcome.





CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE OUTREACH STRATEGY

Outreach is a proven best practice in the corporate world, incorporating such techniques as benchmarking, market research, and networking. In our use of the word, however, outreach means much more than that. Outreach requires a strategy for structuring a network of cutting-edge thinkers, assembling and motivating the network, and devising both a group process for generating true insight and an analytical process for turning that insight into action.

Structuring the Network

Before you assemble a network to help you solve a problem, you need to set up an infrastructure to manage the network. Over the past 20 years, Monitor has built a “network of networks” to serve our clients in industry, government, and the nonprofit sector. It’s an extensive community of thousands of experts and thought leaders around the world whom Monitor accesses to help address difficult problems. Monitor supports its network by engaging all of its analysts in various parts of the outreach process. The network is also supported by a dedicated network builder who manages the day-to-day activities of the network, oversees recruitment, supervises information exchange logistics, and manages network databases.

We helped an intelligence agency build and nurture a 600-person network. They have a relationship in which they know their network members’ interests, their backgrounds, and how they’ve agreed to work with them. The challenge is that in the intelligence community, problems change frequently, and so you need to have a network that is flexible enough so that new people can be added quickly based on the problems you’re solving – and also to continuously bring in fresh perspectives.

To manage a network effectively, it’s critical that you have an outreach strategy that guides your work with a network. Here, you need to articulate the problem you’re trying to address. This gives focus to your network efforts.

If you've got a problem and you've decided that outreach is necessary, a first step is designing an outreach strategy that's based on understanding a set of key questions: Are we looking for facts or are we looking for ideas, or are we looking for both? Are we looking for expansive thinking or are we looking for decision-oriented thinking? Knowing the answers at each stage of the process helps you figure out which kinds of people would make sense to engage with and which processes could be most useful with each group. There are advantages and trade-offs to each approach, and they can be mixed and matched within the same process.

INFORMATION-GATHERING: To gather straightforward factual information, you might conduct a one-on-one interview or a face-to-face presentation with a subject matter expert. But if you are looking for insight into a more ambiguous and complex problem, you need a diverse network.

IDEA-GENERATION: Diverse groups are extremely helpful if you're looking for big ideas. But they aren't ideal when you have a diverse group of people saying, "What about this? What about that?" What you may actually need are facts.

DECISION-MAKING: If you're looking for decisions, you may require a group with a similarity in thinking, which is often faster and more efficient. But you get closure quickly and not necessarily expansive thinking with such a group.

Another issue you face is the decision about whether or not to have a center to the network. Again, there are pros and cons to both strategies.

Using Outreach to Improve Intelligence

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE A lower cost and efficient way to enrich existing sources and perspectives

BASIC RESEARCH A highly effective way to identify key topics, frame difficult problems, and structure analysis

ESTIMATIVE ANALYSIS An expansive way to challenge assumptions, surface new insights, and identify alternative possibilities

WARNING A comprehensive way of uncovering emerging and under-explored issues, threats, and opportunities



THE HUB-AND-SPOKE MODEL: Do you want to be the center of the network, and engage with network members as needed? With the hub-and-spoke model, the organization is at the center, working like a convener to pull people in. With a center you have control, and you know what's going on.

A NETWORK-TO-NETWORK APPROACH: Do you want an approach that facilitates interaction among network members? The challenge with the network-to-network approach is that it's difficult to control information or access, because there's no center. You tend to get more creativity in this structure, and it's more open to serendipity: People get to know each other independent of the convener. But it's also a huge investment to nurture this type of large network. To get people to interact with each other requires that you think through important computer network and infrastructure management issues, which a specialized consultant can assist with.

BUILDING A NETWORK

Many people think that outreach is nothing more than conducting an interview with a subject expert, or networking with leading thinkers at a conference. In fact, it requires that you assemble three very different kinds of people. Each type has its place, depending on the nature of information and insight you're seeking:

SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS. SMEs are people who have specific kinds of information that you need. They work at the leading edge of their field and can identify and articulate emerging trends. If you're trying to understand the future of Brazil, for instance, you might bring in a scholar who has 25 years of experience studying Brazilian politics to give you a deep level of factual information about this specific aspect of the country.

SMEs are particularly well-suited for fact-gathering in an early research stage where all you need is relatively simple background information, before a facilitated group process is convened to generate higher-order insight. The problem is that experts are often narrowly focused, highly steeped in data or "the weeds," and they can be biased toward their field's approach to problems, rather than thinking in a cross-disciplinary way about an issue.

Sometimes we have an illusion of expertise when consulting with SMEs, when in reality an expert's opinion could be one of many. That's why we tend to seek SME's with competing points of view. Without a process for sifting and evaluating the information you receive, and incorporating it into a group process and analysis to generate insight, the information you collect will be not necessarily be useful or systematic.

BIG-PICTURE SYNTHESIZERS. These are people who may have deep knowledge of a particular area but who also are comfortable working across domains and are able to make connections between things. The kinds of people who tend to be good synthesizers are people like journalists, authors, editors, and TV interviewers.

They question key assumptions, connect ideas from across disciplines, and “stretch” ideas while solving complex problems. They are good at making sense of information and often can help make connections that lead to insight. In a sense, they are curators of knowledge. A museum curator doesn't necessarily need to be an artist himself; he takes a collection of art and makes a judgment call about which art to use. The best curators also integrate art into the visual and sensory environment that they're in, so that they are creating an entire experience for how that art is consumed.

BEST-PRACTICE ADVISORS. These are people in different industries from yours who are facing similar kinds of problems. We've found that clients can frequently borrow ideas from them to solve problems and generate insight. Advisors are different from experts and synthesizers because they have practical solutions that have worked in their environments which could be applicable to yours. Advisors work particularly well for a group-process in which multidisciplinary experts, synthesizers, and advisors come together to jointly solve problems and generate fresh insights.

▶ For example, Monitor worked with a group of software companies who were facing an environment in which software is becoming increasingly free. We brought in the musician Peter Gabriel to talk to a group of software developers. This may have seemed a bit unusual, but it actually made sense, because Peter Gabriel had, years before, dealt with fans who were making bootleg recordings at his concerts.





Rather than trying to fight the fans, many musicians like Gabriel took a cue from groundbreaking bands like the Grateful Dead, who simply invited fans to plug into the band's sound system to make recordings and encouraged them to copy and distribute the tapes however they wanted. It has proven to be free viral marketing for the bands, and has helped musicians make money indirectly. Musicians increasingly are making most of their revenues from concert ticket and merchandise sales, not the music they sell through record companies on CDs or as downloads.

The developers learned a lesson. They decided to give their products away and sell services to customize, install, and maintain the software instead, an approach the Linux company Red Hat helped pioneer. Peter Gabrielle participated because he enjoys working on complex problems.

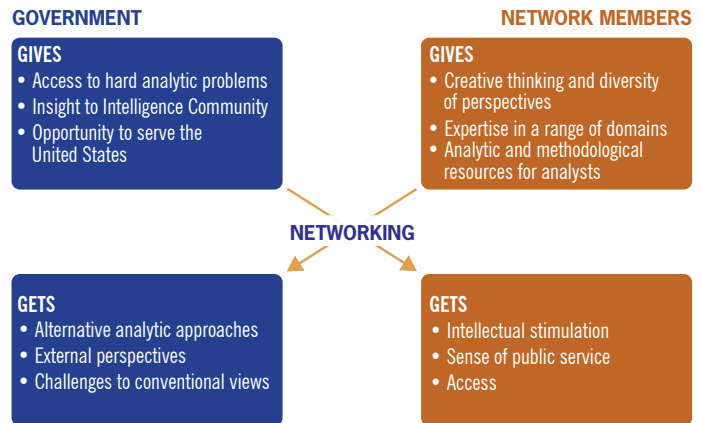
Motivating the Network

When recruiting a network, reciprocity is crucial. This is not a transaction. It may be natural to think that all someone wants is to get paid, but it's likely that the people you pay may deliver the wrong kind of information for discovering insights.

You need to motivate the network through nonfinancial means. A key way we do this is our "gives and gets" approach. Participants give their insights and expertise freely, and in return they receive nonfinancial rewards for their participation, such as new ideas, networking opportunities, and the satisfaction derived from having helped the government tackle or resolve a vexing problem. "Gives and gets" is a proven network management strategy that Monitor has used to build lasting relationships with its network members.

The kinds of people you want to work with need new ideas they can use. They often want to be engaged, to be thought of, to be a part of something, to have access to valuable information. The intelligence community can appeal to people's sense of patriotism and contributing to a greater good.

A real challenge to the intelligence community is the fact that it cannot share a lot of information with outsiders about its activities. That's certainly an obstacle, but the intelligence community also has something else to offer: intrigue and fascinating, complex challenges. People are even more curious about engaging with them. You can give someone a tour of an agency's headquarters. It costs you little, but that network member might remember it as one of the best tours of her life.



The wrong thing to do is to shy away from accessing people because they're difficult to reach or because they seemingly don't want to engage with the intelligence community. Those are the voices you actually need to hear. One way to engage these individuals is to use personal relationships to validate yourself, and then to be clear about the joint problem you're trying to solve.

In our experience, we have gotten the participation of the most liberal and the most conservative people, the people who have contempt for the intelligence agencies and the people who are the most patriotic, based on telling them that we are getting together to address a problem and we want their voice to be heard. Whether or not they like the agency, it's important to have their voice heard. Generally speaking, we've been impressed with how many people are willing to do that.



Creating an Experience

Finally you need to convene this network of people and analysts around a shared problem. For that you have to create the right experience. We like to think of three stages to the process of creating an experience that generates insight:

EXPLORATION. All ideas get heard in this stage. Keep it open and nonjudgmental. Experts, synthesizers, and advisors are all helpful at this point. There are two things that need to get done through exploration: choosing the appropriate information to focus on; and creating the right group process.

First, you need people to be on the same page, and understanding the problem at the right level of granularity. And then you need to build a creative yet structured way for them to think and contribute. That might involve sharing facts, brainstorming ideas, and then coming up with a resolution. It might mean preparing information in advance and getting people to react. There are many different ways of doing this, but the main point is to know whether you're asking people to share their expertise, discover something, co-create insight, or even solve difficult problems together.

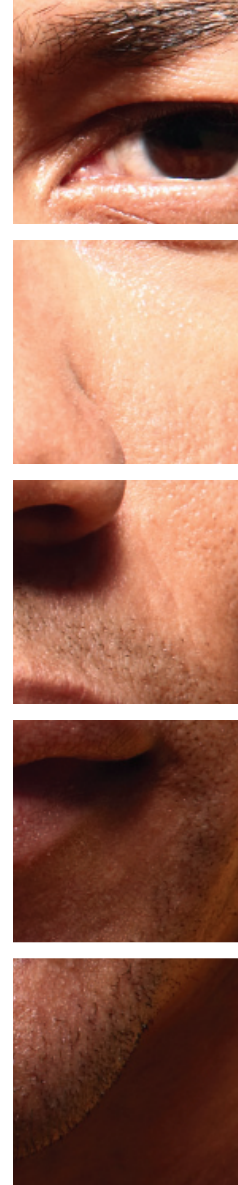
You'll often want to mix and match these goals for the right occasion. Sometimes you'll need to interview people one-on-one on the phone to get some of the facts and a shared understanding that you summarize and give people to read ahead of time. Then you might mix that with a problem-solving approach where you get people in the same room.

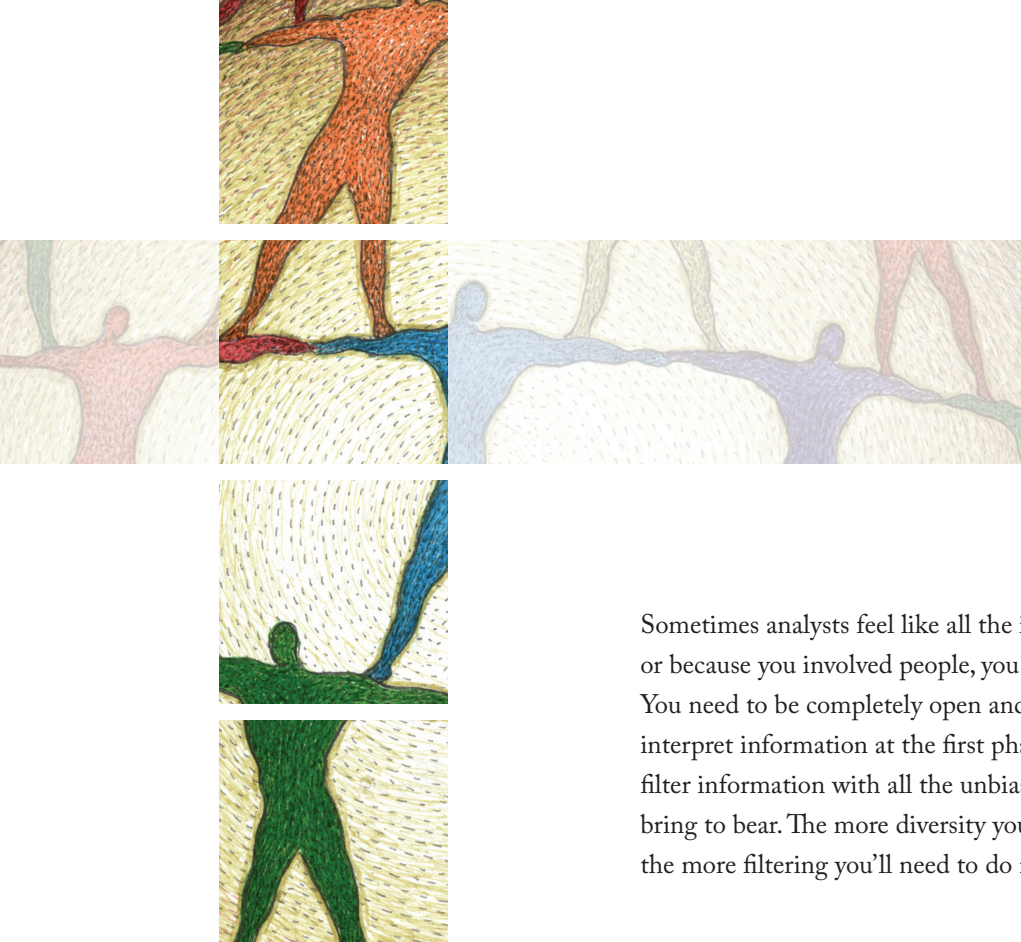
At that point, it's important that participants "play well." It's the convener's responsibility to create an environment in which all the voices are heard effectively, not just those with the strongest opinions or the loudest voices. You need good facilitation expertise, and a structure so that opinions from everyone in the room are heard, even quiet people whose opinions or personal approaches are less strong but still valuable. There is a large literature of well-established group process techniques available in this area to guide your work.

SYNTHESIS. Next a small team of multidisciplinary people who are skilled at abstracting out what matters synthesizes and organizes what happened during the exploration process. This can happen in a group process with network members or among analysts afterward.

Here you're applying judgment to try to organize, codify, and understand what was said. Synthesizers can be particularly helpful at this stage, working with analysts, who apply their judgment and experience to the information and ideas assembled and make choices about what to emphasize and how to portray it.

DECISION-MAKING. After the outreach stage is complete and network members go back to their work, analysts need to generate insight from this dialogue. In the third phase, you're making decisions. This is an analytic phase that uses a much closer in-group to research ideas and put them at a common level of granularity. Ideas are turned into critical insights or actionable recommendations, and then analytical judgments or tactical plans.





Sometimes analysts feel like all the ideas generated need to get used, or because you involved people, you need to weigh the ideas equally. You need to be completely open and non-judgmental in how you interpret information at the first phase, but you want to increasingly filter information with all the unbiased judgment and experience you bring to bear. The more diversity you deploy in the outreach process, the more filtering you'll need to do now.

OUTREACH IS A MIND-SET

Outreach is not just a step in the process, or a means of more information collection. It's certainly not yet another -int. It's a mind-set. You can't just set aside a special day for outreach, and then get back to the traditional business of analysis. Outreach is best when it governs the full analysis process, and is integrated seamlessly into the IC's day-to-day operations. What's counterintuitive to people who are beginning to do outreach is that many times what actually produces the most value is the processing of information together with members of a network, not the specific facts that people bring to the table.

Today's intelligence problems are increasingly being addressed using sophisticated approaches to outreach. The community is deepening its capabilities in this area – and sharing the best practices it learns on its outreach journey. All this is happening while technology platforms and social networking tools are further enhancing the ways in which analysts access outside perspectives to generate critical insights.

Systematic, aggressive, and innovative outreach is not the wave of the future; it is the reality of the here and now for any knowledge organization that seeks to harness holistic insight and mitigate against tactical and strategic surprise.

About Monitor's Intelligence Practice

Monitor's intelligence practice helps the government prepare for the future. Our multi-disciplinary team leverages open-source research and best practices from industry to develop customized frameworks for addressing complex intelligence problems. We offer a network of thousands of creative thought leaders and experts from around the world who bring outside perspectives to the Intelligence Community. We also design forward-leaning custom training programs that teach intelligence analysts advanced approaches. As recognized leaders in anticipating strategic surprise, we offer a variety of strategic planning services to the Intelligence Community.

With thirty offices around the world, the Monitor Group works with governments, businesses, and not-for-profits, assisting these organizations to institutionalize processes so that they are better prepared for the future.

For more information on Monitor's intelligence practice and our outreach programs, please contact Doug Randall at doug_randall@monitor.com or (415) 932-5369.