# freePint®

Plus ...

Jobs,
Discussion,
Tips, Reviews
and Events

# Contents

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## About FreePint

FreePint is a global network of people who find, use, manage and share work-related information. Members receive this free twice-monthly newsletter, which is packed with tips, features and resources.

Joining FreePint is free at <http://www.freepint.com/> and connects information practitioners around the world with resources, events and answers to their tricky research and information questions at the FreePint Bar, our free online forum: <http://www.freepint.com/bar/>.

The FreePint Newsletter is available online in several formats and can be read, saved and forwarded at <http://www.freepint.com/issues/>.

## Editorial

Sitting in one place while doing business somewhere else is a daily reality for information professionals - this is a fact I'm aware of this week as I wander around the SLA conference in Denver, Colorado, USA, meeting friends from all over with the rest of my FreePint colleagues.

Of course, we don't have to travel from our desks to do business in a foreign country, and this week we take a closer look at doing business in countries where companies and individuals are both at risk.

Frequent contributor Jill Fenton offers a feature in which she examines doing business in a region associated with war and political upheaval alongside economic growth. You can read more about doing business in the Middle East - and more from Jill Fenton - in the next issue of VIP <http://www.vivavip.com/>.

Daphne Raban, a professor at the University of Haifa in Israel, writes about working closely together in her article "CI: Collaborative Intelligence". In the search for a tailored, Hebrew-language textbook, she launched a successful project creating one from scratch with the help of her MBA students and a MediaWiki module.

Also in this issue is a review of "Teaching Web Search Skills: Techniques and Strategies of Top Trainers" from Louise Ellis-Barrett.

Be sure to take a closer look at our next issue for the Free Pint Limited coverage of SLA. We received a substantial response to our survey asking you which sessions you wanted us to cover. You can also read updates from the floor from our team at the FreePint Bar <http://www.freepint.com/bar/>.

As always, if FreePint is helpful to you, please consider spreading the word. Share FreePint with a colleague, and provide a testimonial at <http://www.freepint.com/testimonial.htm>.
Sincerely,

Monique Cuvelier Editor, FreePint
e: monique.cuvelier@freepint.com
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# My Favourite Tipples

by Adrian Janes

Adrian Janes is a librarian with the London Borough of Havering. He enjoys reading 'books', a sort of PDA that needs no internal power supply.

Submit your top five favourite web sites. See the guidelines at <http://www.freepint.com/author/>.

- Karen Blakeman, of RBA Information Services <http://www.rba.co.uk/>, shares her considerable expertise in searching the Internet through downloadable presentations, a free newsletter and a guide to business information sites. Extremely informative and regularly updated.

- Thumbshots.com Ranking <http://ranking.thumbshots.com/> graphically compares results from major search engines, to show striking differences in coverage and ranking. An impressive training tool and a search time-saver.

- Pinakes <http://www.hw.ac.uk/libWWW/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html> conveniently brings together a large range of subject and multi- subject gateways across many academic disciplines, including art, law, psychology and business and economics.

- Find Articles <http://findarticles.com/> is a good general source for free articles, mainly from American sources. Also provides links to the individual publications' websites.

- Literary Resources on the Net <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/> is an excellent collection of annotated links spanning the Classical era to the Twentieth Century, both movements and individual authors. Includes some links to non-English literatures.

{ business intelligence }

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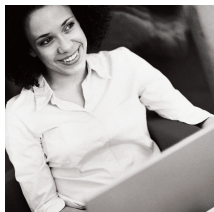
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| **Cataloguer** | **Senior Cataloguer/Library Metadata Expert** |
| Qualified Cataloguer required asap for a 6 month contract based in Birmingham *Recruiter: Weekes Gray Recruitment* Country: United Kingdom <http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6978> | Cataloguing and researching ontologies, metadata and taxonomies. *Recruiter: Bridgeman Art Library* Country: United Kingdom <http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6973> |

See over for job listings ...

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### Information Officer - Stand Alone - Charity sector

Charity and Not-for-Profit sector clients. Organisation requires confident Library and Information Specialist.
Recruiter: Glen Recruitment
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6915>

### Funding Researcher

The European Association for Jewish Studies, based near Oxford, will appoint a Funding Researcher for 1 year from September 2007.
Recruiter: European Association for Jewish Studies
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6969>

### Senior Information Officer (Virtual Learning Environment)

Liaise closely with VLE manager on all operational aspects of the system. Specific responsibility for developing new solutions.
Recruiter: TFPL Ltd.
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j7015>

### Training & Know-how Co-ordinator

Exciting new training and marketing position work within a leading international law firm.
Recruiter: Aslib, The Association for Information Management
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j7027>

### Assistant Librarian

Legal research role, 6-12 months, Sheffield - must have law firm library experience or legal qualification.
*Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment and Services Limited*
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j7008>

### Information & Knowledge Manager

Oversee strategies to effectively gather, retain and distribute knowledge, learning & awareness, throughout the organisation.
*Recruiter: WWF*
Country: United Kingdom
<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j6999>

NB: These are just a selection of information-related jobs in the Jinfo database <http://www.jinfo.com/>. Receive the latest job listings weekly with the free Jinfo Update. Free to subscribe at <http://www.jinfo.com/>

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**E:** support@freepint.com

## FUMSI Reports from Free Pint Limited

Helping you Find, Use, Manage and Share Information

### Project Handbook Report and Tool Kit

How to write project handbooks that are clear, useful and get used

More info:
http://web.freepint.com/go/shop/report/project-handbook/
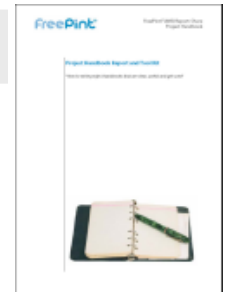
### Product Evaluation Report and Tool Kit

Make the most of product trials. Provides an adaptable methodology for evaluating business information products. Includes 5 worksheets, sample needs assessment tools and a sample evaluation report.

More info:
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Turn KM techniques into RM initiatives. Step-by-step guidance on building or improving a risk management programme. Includes 8 hands-on worksheets.

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### Company Portfolio Series

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Monique Cuvelier is Editor of the FreePint Newsletter. She has served as editor of several publications and her writing has appeared in Publish, USA Today, Bankrate and many others. Learn more about her at <http://www.onopoly.com/support/team/>..

Subscribe to the twice-weekly email digests at <http://www.freepint.com/subs/>

- If Al Gore had enemies in the room at the keynote address of the SLA conference in Denver, they weren't easy to spot. His speech was tailored for information practitioners and mentioned how workers can deal with the deluge of information. It sounds a little like FreePint's FUMSI - read how <http://www.freepint.com/go/b144200>.

- One FreePinter has been asked to keep tabs on the erection of The Shard in London <http://www.freepint.com/go/b144236>, a task that seems easier than it really is. In particular, this researcher is looking for a mapped 'footprint'. Sources welcome.

- Ever-organised project managers are always looking for tips to streamline their processes, including the Six Thinking Hats <http://www.freepint.com/go/b142710>. A 'Pinter is looking for tips, and a few interesting ideas have surfaced. And if you manage projects, you might be interested in the latest FUMSI report: Project Handbook Report and Tool Kit <http://web.freepint.com/go/shop/report/project-handbook/>.

- Similarly, another Bar visitor is wondering how people keep track of their time and tasks. What recording sheets do you use? Are there any free resources? Read tips and share your own <http://www.freepint.com/go/b136371>.

- Copyrighted images are always a hot topic on the Bar. A fresh one regarding cartoons in a presentation has just surfaced. See helpful hints at <http://www.freepint.com/go/b141751>.

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## Published Reviews

Selection of published reviews:

- European companies
- Asian products
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- Factiva, LexisNexis and Thomson Business Intelligence
- Skyminder
- RUSLANA
- MINT Global
- Company Insights from OneSource
- HighBeam
- Alacra, Thomson, FT
- Silobreaker
- Verdict Retail Knowledge Centre:
- Business Insights
- Snapdata
- Global Market Information Database
- MarketResearch.com
- Market Research (Profound) on Thomson Business Intelligence
- Web Alerts

## New: Request a sample

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## Current Issue

- Log In - Timely news from VIP Wire

- In Scope - Your password or a bar of chocolate?

- Insight - Emerald targets the corporate market

- Focus On -A global view on foreign investment and development in my icc

Coming in 2007: More product reviews each month, plus focused feature issues on Middle East/Africa and more. What would you like us to cover? Share your thoughts at any time to support@vivaVIP.com, or post them to the VIP Lounge.

## Forthcoming Reviews

- Jun 2007   Middle East/Africa: business information needs and sources

## Testimonial

"VIP gives me an objective analysis of business information products and vendors as well as practical and informative advice on industry issues."

*Kerryn Dillon,*
*European Marketing Manager,*
*OneSource Information Services*

# "CI: Collaborative Intelligence"

By Daphne R. Raban

Daphne R. Raban, Ph.D. <http://gsb.haifa.ac.il/~draban/home/> is an Assistant Professor at the School of Management in the University of Haifa and an active member of the Center for the Study of the Information Society. She received her Ph.D., Summa Cum Laude in 2004 from the U. of Haifa. She is recipient of the Emerald/EFMD Outstanding Doctoral Research Award in the category of enterprise applications of Internet technology and the Roger K. Summit scholarship for her academic and professional achievements. Her interests are in economics of information goods, information/knowledge sharing, competitive intelligence, and games and simulations. Her work has appeared in refereed IS journals and professional magazines. She teaches online competitive intelligence, virtual communities and information economics..

Like most CI practitioners and academics, I always took the term CI to stand for 'competitive intelligence'. I taught a class on the subject in the MBA program at the University of Haifa, and through discussions with students I learned the term CI might better stand for 'collaborative intelligence'.

My students and I used this class at the Graduate School of Management <http://gsb.haifa.ac.il> and the Center for the Study of the Information Society <http://infosoc.haifa.ac.il> to launch an experiment that fulfilled a need for a customised textbook, an interactive lesson and a collaborative model that can easily be replicated in academic and corporate environments to great success.

CI (collaborative intelligence, that is) means pooling knowledge from a variety of people to produce unique sources of information co- authored by many. CI is part of the solution to the paradoxical nature of today's information environment. What's the paradox? On the one hand, for a number of years we have seen the rise of user-generated content (UGC); on the other hand we have yet to create effective and efficient organisational knowledge sharing. It seems that people are much keener on sharing tags, photos, videos and knowledge in public spaces such as Del.ici.ous, Flickr, YouTube and Wikipedia than they are on logging into elaborate platforms for knowledge sharing. This paradox calls for managerial as well as academic attention. In this article I will provide an account of how CI was applied in an academic setting and I will show its high relevance to managers in industry as well.

## Why CI?

Why should CI interest managers? There are a number of reasons, including:

- One of the biggest obstacles to good competitive intelligence is managerial blind spots that characterise hierarchies and long-time managers, according to CS Fleisher and BE Bensoussan in the chapter "Blindspot Analysis" in the book "Strategic and Competitive Analysis". Collaborative intelligence decentralises knowledge and may attenuate some common blindspots.

- CI is an easy, fast and effective way of building a knowledge-based community as part of an organisation-wide plan to manage knowledge

- CI crosses internal organisational boundaries and brings together experts that share common knowledge but do not belong to the same organisational units

- CI reduces the power of specific 'indispensable' individuals by pooling knowledge and documenting it. This may reduce the barriers for occupational mobility and increase flexibility in the process of hiring

- CI is achieved by amassing fairly small contributions by many participants. A small effort by many generates unique sources of knowledge not available outside the organisation. The cost or effort of participation is low and the benefit is high to the individual and to the organisation

- CI is a platform that allows managers and employees who are not necessarily known by many in their organisation to express their expertise and get respect for it. CI is empowering!

- CI can also be used to open the organisation to external sources of knowledge and innovation, for example, one can think of joint projects for companies and their suppliers or customers.  Microsoft uses a collaborative platform for customer support where customers help customers sort out their difficulties with MS applications.

Why should CI interest academics?

- CI makes academic teaching more engaging and interactive

- CI offers opportunities to custom-design learning materials

- CI has the potential for improving learning by the students. CI is empowering!

- CI offers a new dimension for student assignments and since it is done in an online network, measurement is inherent

- Speaking of measurement, CI is fertile ground for academic research on collaboration, learning and social phenomena in these projects.

**A case in point: CI in academia**

Since the year 2000 I have taught a course entitled "Online Competitive Intelligence" as part of the MBA program in the School of Management, University of Haifa. The course was always accompanied by a website and an e-learning system. The website contained links to databases and other valuable sources of business information. The e-learning system consisted of the class presentations, assignments, readings and discussion groups. All information in both online environments was supplied by me as the course instructor.

The job of updating it became harder every year as the number of sources increased together with a rise in Internet business dynamics, with sources disappearing and reincarnating in other locations. In this 'broadcast' mode, the students' involvement was limited to participation in discussions.

Another difficulty was the absence of a good academic textbook in Hebrew. While our students are proficient in English, it is desirable to have a textbook in our native language with local examples. In addition, one of our classes includes students who are managers in the non-profit sector. The course was tailored for their special needs, and, again, I felt the lack of a solid textbook for this sector.

Obviously, one solution could be that I, as the course instructor, would embark on the daunting task of writing a textbook. There had to be a more practical and faster solution! Then I remembered the book I read about two years ago: "The Wisdom of Crowds" by James Surowiecki. The solution seemed simple: Harness the knowledge and ability of MBA students to write a textbook in a collaborative effort. Within three months 130 students and I have built a rich and unique textbook which is available to anyone with an Internet connection and who can read Hebrew <http://ci.haifa.ac.il>. How did we go about achieving this wonderful feat?

First, I decided that the wiki platform is the most appropriate way to create UGC for long-term use. The University's computer support personnel constructed a MediaWiki platform

within a day, and I started filling it. After writing a brief homepage describing the project, I created an elaborate table of contents that included all the chapters that I thought were essential in such a book.

Students were also invited to suggest topics that were not yet mentioned in the initial TOC. The student assignment specified writing according to acceptable academic standards. Each pair of students had to write a complete chapter from scratch. In addition, each individual student was charged with reviewing two chapters written by others and improving them. Improvements could be anything from semantic or grammar corrections to the introduction of new content and additional references.

**Addressing concerns**

I am sure some of the readers of this article are nodding their heads saying: 'How good can student papers be?' Our MBA students are all mid- or upper-level managers, they are mature and intelligent. They are highly motivated to succeed and usually learn out of deep interest and commitment. Their contributions are usually of very high quality. The papers, in our case chapters, are mostly very good, although some are better than others. The book is by no means finished, and that's part of its beauty. This book will never be finished. It will always be subject to improvements, expansions and updates; unlike 'stale' textbooks, this is a living project.

Moreover, the writing process

demanded that the students apply some of the practices required by competitive intelligence work: analyse information needs, identify sources of information, run searches, evaluate the information obtained, synthesise it into a coherent report, and provide pertinent examples. The assignment expresses the students' ability as independent learners, their critical thinking, and it even gives some of them the satisfaction of doing original work.

Some impediments to the successful application of CI projects include:

- Technophobia - people not understanding what they should do and how to do it, preferring to stick to familiar document forms. This impediment can be easily overcome by brief training and preparation of light support tools such as 'cheat sheets'. In fact, I encountered this difficulty only after the course was over. Students came to me and said that learning the technicalities of the wiki platform was very demanding for some of them. This took me by surprise and I learned a lesson in this regard

- Vulnerability to attack since the system is open. This requires the attention of capable computer support people who will preserve backups and apply the necessary level of security. Several months after the completion of the first phase of the wiki the project disappeared from the server and an error message replaced it. I was horrified! A quick call to the computer support staff revealed that they didn't have the

technical knowledge to retrieve the information from the backup files in its original form with a division to chapters, inclusion of links etc. After a day of panic I found out that one of the students who participated in my class was an expert on open-source applications. Thanks to him the project was completely recovered and returned to its natural state following two days of intensive work

- Lack of support for a variety of file formats. The wiki platform does not currently accommodate most common file types such as pdf, xls, doc, ppt and others. In other words, a wiki won't be a good host for information which was previously stored in these formats. It is a good host for original information that is written directly for the wiki and when no need for the other formats is anticipated.

This CI project has huge potential for future development. First, it can serve as a bridge between academia and industry. Any Hebrew- speaking practitioner is invited to read, and better yet, to contribute to the wiki-CI book. The book must be improved by future generations of students who can find and correct errors, expand chapters, add new ones, add references to academic research and to magazine articles. The biggest potential lies in making this project international by creating similar books in many languages. Any takers?

Beside the possible cooperation

between academia and industry in further developing this particular project, this type of CI has a variety of applications: IBM uses it for customer support <http://www-941.ibm.com/collaboration/wiki/dashboard.action>. Microsoft uses it for supporting its community of developers <http://msdn2.microsoft.com/en-us/library/default.aspx>. Ebay is developing a user's guide with tips from users <http://www.ebaywiki.com/>. Other application ideas include brainstorming, conference preparation, project development and documentation of 'lessons learned'. In short, any kind of information that may generate lasting interest can be preserved in a wiki CI platform quickly and easily.

The future is in CI. Let's face it now.

**Related FreePint links:**

- "Embracing the Wiki Way: Deploying a Corporate Wiki" By Leigh Dodds <http://www.freepint.com/issues/270706.htm#tips>

- "Wikis: The Tools for Information Work and Collaboration"  Written by Jane Kolbas Reviewed by Leigh Dodds <http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/wiki.htm>

- "Using a wiki as a knowledge base?" FreePint Bar Discussion <http://www.freepint.com/go/b73583>

- "Wikipedia: To Use or Not To Use" By Caryn Wesner-Early <http://www.freepint.com/issues/071206.htm#tips>

## FreePint Forthcoming Articles

[Provisional]

- Broadband access
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If you have a suggestion for an article topic, or would like to write for FreePint, then please contact <monique.cuvelier@freepint.com> or read the notes for authors at http://www.onopoly.com/author/

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> # www.jinfo.com

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## Current Jinfo Newsletter

Current issue:

- CV Makeover: From Freelance to Consultant
- Robert Alvarez 's 'Before' CV
- Robert Alvarez 's After' CV

| Review | Before CV | After CV |

# "Teaching Web Search Skills: Techniques and Strategies of Top Trainers"

Written by Greg R. Notess
Reviewed by Louise Ellis-Barrett

Louise Ellis-Barrett is a solo librarian at Downsend School, a prep school in Surrey. When not immersed in children's books or review titles she enjoys reading travel writing and 'classic' novels, and collecting old and antiquarian books. As well as this she can often be heard practising her saxophone and clarinet, found in the garden, the theatre or cinema or practising her knitting and embroidery skills. She enjoys the outdoors, has set herself the challenge of learning Ancient Greek and hopes to one day tour the classical world!

Offering the advice and wisdom of 11 top trainers from librarians to website owners and consultants to university lecturers, Greg Notess advises his readership how to approach and put into action a programme of Web search skills. He offers not only examples of good practice but also worked examples along with discussion of potential pitfalls that may be encountered along the way. Whilst the contributions of the 11 can be found throughout the text, Notess also has helpfully reproduced them in the final chapter, 'Anecdotes, Examples and Exercises', and has included full biographies, complete with contact details, in Appendix A.

After having provided a background of the development of the Internet and World Wide Web and a discussion of the way in which, for many librarians, it can be considered an extension of bibliographic and reference searching, Notess moves on to the essence of his text: how to teach search skills in the most effective style.

To begin he notes that it is important to realise that searching the Web has been designed to be easy - the so-called 'box and button' technique should provide the opportunity for even the most techno- phobic person to access the wealth of information potentially available.

However, many people need help. Notess writes that the student body is likely to fall into three specific groups: the novice, the know-it-all and the experienced user, regardless of the size of the group. For this reason he usefully presents a number of different ideas for

styles of teaching. It is important to remember, he says, that when teaching Web searching, despite the basic 'box and button' approach there is a considerable variation between browsers. The trainer should never assume student knowledge. Notess then considers the benefits and drawbacks of the hands-on session and lecture with discussion.

Three chapters are dedicated to the specific content of tutorials, with plenty of useful advice and some interesting in-depth discussion. Notess' chapter on online tutorials considers the positive and negative aspects of this teaching method, and he gives advice as well as annotated examples of tutorials, including the Web addresses and

platform details. Notess emphasises that trainers should view these before attempting to produce their own, as this can be a very time- consuming process. They also reflect the nature of the training, which can be general or specific, and this influences the style and length of training. Some of the recommendations Notess makes for those planning to create their own training materials are helpful. For example, he suggests providing the class with opportunities to achieve and define terminology from the outset.

Examples of handouts, webpages and worksheets are provided in Appendix B, whilst Appendix C lists all the websites that have been referred to throughout the book in a chapter-by-chapter list. This is also available on Notess' website at <http://www.notess.com/teaching/>, where they are checked and updated. Readers are also invited to contact the author with suggestions of other useful sites or notification of dead links.

"Teaching Web Search Skills" is a highly accessible and very useful introduction to the process of teaching these skills to students of any age, background and ability. It could be used by teachers and academics to teach students in school or college, or by librarians and other information professionals to teach skills to library users and anyone whose job requires them to make good use of the resources available on the Internet. It should be invaluable to the novice, the know-it-all and the experienced trainer alike.

**Related FreePint links:**

- Find out more about this book online at the FreePint Bookshelf <http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/resmeth.htm>

- "Extreme Searcher's Guide to Web Search Engines" Written by Randolph Hock Reviewed by Nick Lloyd <http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/extreme.htm>

- Enterprise Search Guidebook <http://www.freepint.com/shop/report/enterprise-search/>

- "Searching for success: an update on search engine developments" By Duncan Parry <http://www.freepint.com/issues/150404.htm#tips>

**Related links:**

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## "Vigilant Due Diligence"
By Jill Fenton

Jill Fenton has over 10 years of professional business research experience. Her career includes Research Management and Analyst positions at Deloitte & Touche LLP, Boston Consulting Group and Oliver Wyman. She also holds an Honours Degree in Information Management. Jill is a committee member of the City Information Group and a member of the Association of Independent Information Professionals. She provides many research services including general capacity support, bespoke project research and training for information professionals. She can be reached at <jill@fentonresearch.co.uk> or via her website <http://www.fentonresearch.co.uk/> or blog <http://jillfenton.typepad.com/fenton_research_weblog/>.

One could argue that today's global landscape hosts more risks to country, corporate and individual safety than ever before. Consider the war in Iraq, the volatile situation in the Middle East, global warming, organised crime, the growing threat of domestic and international terrorism, political regimes - for example in Zimbabwe - and military and nuclear weapon development by Russia, Iran and North Korea. These issues pose a threat not only to human lives but also to economic and business investment and development. But what kind of a threat?

### Types of threat

### Economic

As described in a recent Economist article, any shock to an economy will create waves. Output, prices, employment and inflation may all be affected. According to Nick Bloom of Stanford University, events that increase uncertainty, and therefore affect share prices, are actually fairly frequent. Extraordinary events like 9/11, the collapse of WorldCom and Enron and the Iraq war can have an even greater impact. Bloom describes how raised levels of uncertainty, brought on by a shock, tend to trigger a 'wait and see' attitude in companies: 'Firms that would otherwise have increased investment or taken on more workers postpone their plans.' An increase in uncertainty can, therefore, mean a drop in investment, employment and productivity in domestic and global economies.

### Financial

In addition to threatening economics, a shock or threat, depending on its nature, can dramatically impact specific industries and businesses. The UK terror threats in 2006 were cited as a key contributor to revenue and profit losses experienced by the UK travel industry. MyTravel and BAA both reported losses in revenue. Other businesses, on the fringes of the industry, were also affected, like holiday product, electronic device and duty free retailers.

Direct financial threats may occur due to a specific event but they can also emerge from more generic avenues, for example foreign politics. President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has announced that his government is preparing to seize majority shares in all of Zimbabwe's foreign-owned businesses and mines. Companies in the line of fire include Rio Tinto, Anglo American, Standard Chartered and Barclays. Not only could this move signal disaster for corporate business lines, it could also seriously hinder any future foreign investment in the country.

Although uncertainty can create losses it can also generate gains. Eurostar experienced a boost in business in summer 2006 as travellers sought alternative means of transport. BAE Systems, Britain's biggest defence company, posted a 21% increase in half-year turnover in 2006 due to sales of military equipment. Opportunities are likely to continue to grow for Britain's defence industry as international relationships, with Libya for example, develop.

### Reputational

The nature of some businesses and the geographic areas in which they operate mean that their exposure to factors that may threaten and influence their reputation is higher: corruption, organised crime, money laundering, environmental issues, social and human rights issues, political and personal connections, and corporate affiliations. In March 2006 Corporate Watch estimated that UK companies had won approximately 1.1bn GBP worth of contracts since the start of the Iraq war.

Very few Western companies, however, were keen to publicise their exact activities. Why? In the past, Nike and Gap have been accused of using overseas sweatshops. International energy companies, like Shell and BP, have found themselves in hot water over environmental issues, including the disposal of oil containers and rigs and intrusive exploration projects. How has this criticism affected the company's reputation, if at all? Would it influence a potential investor or partner? Would an association with these firms affect your reputation?

Some may suggest that in today's socially conscious environment, maintaining a sound and ethical corporate reputation is of upmost importance.

### It's a risky business, but someone's got to do it

So, if there are so many risks involved in dealing with certain countries and companies, why would a business even consider entering a particular market or industry or investing in a relationship? Growth and development are key drivers.

### Opportunities

BP, following in the footsteps of Royal Dutch Shell and ConocoPhillips, announced a 455m GBP gas exploration deal with Libya, the once vilified state. According to the Financial Times, UK and US energy companies have been keen to secure a share in the country's gas and oil reserves for some time, especially as it's the 14th largest in the world and includes the largest oilfield in Africa. Sanctions relating to Libya's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and involvement with the Lockerbie bombing were lifted, allowing foreign multinationals to fully explore opportunities within the region. And,

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according to Business Week, if the political climate and cross-border relationships remain positive, North Africa could become home to one of the world's next economic booms. All sounds very positive for opportunity-seeking multinationals. But risks still remain. If Libya's economic policy fluctuates then multinationals could face an increase in taxes and royalties. As we approach the 40th anniversary of the Six Day War, the troubles in the Middle East seem far from over. Despite this, BG Group is apparently considering supplying Palestinian gas to Israel. This is a highly risky deal as Israel has previously vowed never to buy gas from its neighbour. The ongoing violence within the region may require BG Group to reconsider and renegotiate. Emerging Markets and Products

We have all heard of the fantastic business and investment opportunities the 'Asian Tiger' offers, but are there potential risks? HBR comments that in addition to intellectual property rights violations, corruption and potential political instability, CEOs should be aware of the huge environmental degradation in China, including soil erosion, water scarcity and pollution. These issues may not only affect the countries' GDP, and therefore economic stability, but could be a real risk to a multinational's operations and reputation if not dealt with sensitively. GE, for example, have taken this on board. In addition to their domestic operations, they are working with the Chinese government to help develop water and coal technologies.

As the world around us continues to change, so do behaviours. According to the FT, September 11th helped consolidate a global Islamic identity. Thanks to the rise in the number of Muslims seeking religiously sanctioned financial products and a boom in Middle East wealth, the Islamic finance market has rocketed. Standard & Poor's estimate that the sukuk market will grow from $70 billion to over $160 billion by the end of the decade. Western financial institutions have seized on this opportunity by offering innovative products to a growing sophisticated market. But risks still remain. In addition to confusion surrounding exactly which products comply with Islamic law, Mahomoud El-Gamal, chair of Islamic economics, finance and management at Rice University, Houston, makes the interesting point that '(Islamic finance) supports the development of a separatist and boastful Islamic identity.'

**Reducing the risk**

We have established that risks and threats to business investment and development exist through a multitude of external and associated factors. For a company to fully understand the risks involved in any new investment or venture effective due diligence research is essential.

Michele Bate of Archer Van Den Broeck Limited comments that without thorough due diligence a company can open itself up to risks to its reputation based on the companies (and people) with which it does business - suppliers, customers and joint venture partners.

A stark example of this is the case of the Global Relief Foundation. After the September 11th attacks, investigations brought to light the real nature of the charity, as the finance facility for Al Q'aeda. Any company or individual associated with the charity was, therefore, also under scrutiny.

Due diligence research can involve various investigative analysis techniques including economic and country forecasts, political policies and connections, corporate affiliations, personal and business associates, and legal or corporate misdemeanours.

Researching and reviewing material in the public domain such as press, Internet newsgroups, blogs, corporate records, litigation records, bankruptcy records, liens and judgments where available can highlight areas for further investigation.

Although it is difficult to predict every potential threat or risk associated with a country, industry or company, implementing an effective due diligence research process at the early stages of the investment process is vital to help reduce uncertainty and therefore losses.  As Bate says: 'It's vital that you try to find out who you are dealing with, even though it is not always easy. Who is behind the company? How did they acquire their wealth? Who do they do business with? Otherwise you might find that other businesses don't want to do business with you!'

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