BLIND SPOT

HERE'S THE thing. We know the competitive environment has become even more intense over the past decade: overwhelmingly managers rate the present level of competition as very or extremely high, and they expect it to become even more intense. Decisions are also made faster, and they know they need more and better information to remain competitive.

Yet in this environment it seems that many in the corporate world remain deluded. Two leading Australian competitive intelligence (CI) specialists, Chris Hall and Babette Bensoussan, have garnered some surprising insights on how companies gather and use competitive information, and the news is not good. Their research, published in *Staying Ahead of the Competition: How firms really manage their competitive intelligence and knowledge* (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2007), included two surveys undertaken in 1996 and 2006, spanning a decade of enormous change. It found evidence of an "intelligent puzzle" – that is, despite clear recognition by managers of the need for competitive intelligence, only a minority made effective use of basic CI techniques.

Why? It seems we aren't aware of simple and highly effective techniques, or we don't trust our colleagues enough to share the right information, or we suffer dissonance (we think we're better than we actually are). The essence, Hall says, is that firms are unprepared – and lack the CI capability – thus creating a competitive blindspot.

NARELLE HOOPER

THEY'RE A WEIRD MOB

IT TURNS out that most successful leaders are weird in some way. They might be great at strategy or analysis, but can be almost autistic when dealing with fellow humans beings. Psychologist Gurnek Bains, CEO and founder of the UK-based corporate psychology firm YSC, says what they need to do is celebrate their "spikes" – their strengths; the qualities that differentiate them from less successful leaders. As for their personality "black spots", wise CEOs can compensate for these by surrounding themselves with people who have an abundance of the qualities they lack.

(See Bookstore, page 84) **FIONA SMITH**

DIRTY BUSINESS

Shane Jacobson gets down and dirty in Kenny.

THE JOINT managing director of the Sydney-based waste management company Sani Hire feels like he owes unofficial Portaloo industry spokesman Kenny some thanks. Jason Wilson (whose voicemail message cheerfully proclaims, "Your business is our business!") says it's hard to find people to do the job. Having to use a giant vacuum to suck the waste from 30 to 40 toilets a day causes some new recruits to bolt on their first day, but other staff members have been with the family business for 15 years.

Since last year's mockumentary hit *Kenny*, workers who were once shy about what they did for a crust are now displaying more occupational pride. So what's with our latter-day fascination with dirty work?

Apart from *Kenny*, there's the "dirty" man – Mike Rowe, host of the Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs* TV show, who throws himself into a host of unpleasant vocations. Such is the interest in physically, morally or socially difficult work that the Nine network has made a local version of the cult series. Witness also the ABC's screening of *The Worst Jobs in History*, an examination of the most unenviable jobs of the past 2000 years, and Channel 10's *Deadliest Catch*, a riveting look at the dangerous work of king-crab fishermen off the Alaskan coast.

And now it seems we've become a nation that shirks the hard yakka ourselves: a host of workers is being imported under the 457 temporary-work permits to do the jobs Australians are too lazy – or too picky – to do, and farmers increasingly can't find anyone to do the hard jobs for low pay.

Believe it or not, the notion of helping workers overcome feelings of "occupational taint" is a field of academic study. Arizona State University's Blake Ashforth, who co-authored a recent study that drew on interviews with managers in stigmatised occupations ranging from morticians to abortion clinic workers and prison guards, says managers in jobs the public considers repellent can use an array of techniques to help their employees cope with, and even feel proud of, their work.

It is also a subject Australian academics have explored. "We often downplay the social rewards people get out of work and managers sometimes do not realise they have the ability to change their work environment," says Ian O. Williamson, associate professor of human resource management at the Melbourne Business School.

Williamson cites the experience of a sock company in the US that turned its fortunes around when it reorganised the factory from an assembly line into pods, to give workers a "social reward" that wasn't there previously.

"Being in a sock factory is pretty menial work," Williamson says. "They had a high turnover rate, but they couldn't afford to raise salaries. They reorganised manufacturing units [and] the owner invested in machinery so workers would work in teams, and they faced each other so they could talk. Even if you're doing a job that is somewhat menial, if you're in control from beginning to end, you can have a high level of accomplishment."

TRACY ONG