



FROM THE RESEARCH BENCH

Business case control is a living decision loop

Competitive intelligence matters after approval only when a source, decision, assumption, owner, test, and result stay linked through the portfolio loop.

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Management summary	2
What can competitive intelligence verify, and where do predictive limits begin?	3
What did the underlying empirical studies measure regarding business case accuracy?	3
Why is continuous business case control an operating routine rather than a one-time finding?	4
How can commercial organizations prevent stage-gate control from degenerating into governance theatre?	5
What feedback loop must govern commercial investments after initial capital sign-off?	6
How should teams audit an approved business case before the next executive review?	6
References	7

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

An accurate intelligence memo can still have no control value if it is not attached to the decision and assumption it was meant to change. This bounded reading keeps Cavallo et al.'s qualitative study of competitive intelligence in four Brazilian firms separate from Kopmann et al.'s cross-sectional study of business-case control in 183 matched German project portfolios. It then joins their evidence boundaries in a reader-facing trace: source position, decision link, business-case assumption, owner, post-approval test, and result. The trace is an operating aid, not a causal finding or a guarantee of portfolio benefit.

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An intelligence memo can be accurate, well sourced, and completely disconnected from control. It can sit in a folder while the portfolio continues to fund the same assumption, with no owner authorised to revise it and no later record of what happened. The practical answer is to keep six objects linked after approval: the intelligence source, the decision it informs, the business-case assumption, the accountable owner, the post-approval test, and the result with its interpretation.

That is a bounded operating trace, not a claim that competitive intelligence causes success or that business-case control guarantees benefits. Two studies help define the edges. Cavallo, Sanasi, Ghezzi, and Rangone examine how competitive intelligence is used across strategy work in four Brazilian firms. Kopmann, Kock, Killen, and Gemünden examine business-case control at the project-portfolio level in a cross-sectional sample of 183 matched German portfolios. Their objects, methods, and outcomes should stay separate. The trace is the author's translation between them.

The neighboring trigger-to-resource decision card makes the same discipline visible from the scenario side. The evidence-over-anecdote test supplies a broader check for whether a number has earned the decision weight being placed on it.

What can competitive intelligence verify, and where do predictive limits begin?

Cavallo and colleagues study four private Brazilian firms with dedicated competitive-intelligence units. Their qualitative multiple-case design combines 28 face-to-face interviews with secondary material. The unit of analysis is the CI business unit, not the performance of a portfolio or the result of one approved business case.

Their abstract makes the strategic tension clear: CI practices, despite their strategic relevance and diffusion, are “still extensively adopted for tactical use.” Across the cases, the units often contribute to tactical work, implementation, and monitoring. Their involvement is more limited at some higher stages of objective setting and strategy formulation. That is a useful observation about where intelligence work sits in an organisation. It is not a prevalence estimate for all CI teams, and it is not evidence that tactical use is ineffective.

The study also leaves a practical question open. An intelligence function can collect, analyse, and disseminate information without the reader being able to point to the decision it changed. A report may inform a conversation, constrain an option, change a timing assumption, or do none of these. The function's existence does not answer that question. The decision trace has to.

What did the underlying empirical studies measure regarding business case accuracy?

Kopmann and colleagues study a different object: business-case control in project portfolios. They define a loop that includes an initial review, ongoing monitoring during execution, and tracking after completion until the business case is realised. In their words, the stages include “the initial review, the ongoing monitoring during the project execution, and the postproject tracking until the business case is realized.”

Their final sample contains 183 matched portfolios across multiple industries, with two informants per portfolio. A decision maker assessed the dependent variable while a portfolio coordinator assessed the independent variables. The design is cross-sectional. The paper reports a positive association between business-case control and project-portfolio success, but it cannot establish the direction of causality or show the mechanism through which

control produced the association. The authors also warn that excessive formal control can constrain creativity and innovation in some portfolio environments.

The two studies therefore answer different questions. Cavallo shows how CI units are positioned and used across a small, purposive set of firms. Kopmann shows how a portfolio-level control construct is measured and associated with success in a larger survey. Neither paper supplies a local source-to-decision record that a reader can copy as a realised case.

Table 1 Two evidence boundaries that should not be pooled

Study and object	Unit and method	What it contributes	Boundary to carry forward
Cavallo et al.: competitive-intelligence use	Four Brazilian firms with dedicated CI units; 28 interviews and secondary material; qualitative multiple-case design.	CI is observed in tactical work, implementation, and monitoring, with more limited involvement in some higher strategic stages.	Purposive four-case sample, small-sample and observer-bias limits, and no prevalence or causal estimate.
Kopmann et al.: business-case control	183 matched German project portfolios; two informants per portfolio; cross-sectional multi-informant survey.	Initial review, ongoing monitoring, and post-project tracking are associated with project-portfolio success.	The association is not a longitudinal intervention or a guarantee; the units and outcomes differ from Cavallo.
Author's source-to-decision trace	A reader records source position, decision link, assumption, owner, test, and result.	It makes the handoff from intelligence to control inspectable.	It is an operating template, not a measured mechanism or source-derived intervention.

Cavallo, Sanasi, Ghezzi & Rangone (2021), pp. 250, 255–267; Kopmann, Kock, Killen & Gemünden (2015), pp. 529–540.

The separation matters because it prevents a familiar but invalid shortcut. A study about where CI is used does not become a study of portfolio performance merely because it mentions strategy. A survey about business-case control does not become evidence about the quality of a particular intelligence memo. The studies can inform different parts of an operating design without being pooled into one effect.

Why is continuous business case control an operating routine rather than a one-time finding?

The useful join is a trace that a portfolio owner can inspect. It starts with the information, but it does not end there.

- 1 Source position. Record what the intelligence item says, who produced it, when it was observed, and how confident the team should be. A link alone is not a position.
- 2 Decision link. State the decision that the item could change: continue, delay, fund, stop, sequence, price, enter, or monitor. If no decision is in scope, the item is context rather than control evidence.
- 3 Business-case assumption. Rewrite the relevant benefit or constraint as an assumption with a denominator and time window. “The market is attractive” is not a testable business-case assumption.

- 4 Owner and authority. Name the person who can revise the assumption, change the resource commitment, or recommend stopping. A name without authority is an administrative field.
- 5 Post-approval test. Define what will be checked, by when, and against which baseline. Set the test before the portfolio spends the resource.
- 6 Result and interpretation. Record the observed result, whether the assumption held, what the owner recommends, and what remains uncertain. A result is not automatically a success and a failed assumption is not automatically a failed decision.

The sequence is an audit schema. It does not say that every intelligence item should move a budget, or that every business case needs an elaborate control system. It says that a claim about use should leave a trace proportionate to the decision’s stakes.

Figure 2 The source-to-decision accountability trace

INTELLIGENCE ITEM AND SOURCE POSITION	DECISION LINK	BUSINESS-CASE ASSUMPTION	OWNER AND AUTHORITY	POST-APPROVAL TEST AND DATE	RESULT AND INTERPRETATION
What it says, source, date, and confidence.	Continue, stop, price, monitor.	Benefit or constraint with denominator and time window.	Who can revise, continue, or stop.	What will be checked and against which baseline.	What happened, what changed, and what remains uncertain.

Blank reader-input fields. A completed row is a trace, not proof of benefit. It becomes control only when the result can change a decision or constraint and the owner has authority to act.

Author's own worksheet. The fields are reader input; no local intelligence item, decision, or realised result is supplied.

How can commercial organizations prevent stage-gate control from degenerating into governance theatre?

The strongest counter-case is that formal control can produce neat records while weakening judgement. A portfolio can satisfy a reporting calendar, hit a metric, and still lose the wider objective. Kopmann and colleagues explicitly warn that excessive formal control may constrain creativity and innovation in some environments. More fields do not solve that problem by themselves.

The trace therefore carries a hard failure rule. If there is no decision change or constraint, no owner with authority to revise or stop the work, or no later result and interpretation, the record is administration rather than control under this framework. A completed row is not proof of benefit. It is evidence that someone has made the decision logic inspectable. The next review still has to show whether the assumption held and what the organisation did with that information.

This rule also prevents intelligence from being judged only by whether it was acted upon. Sometimes the correct decision is to hold the allocation steady because the source does not change the assumption. That is a valid result

if the reason, owner, and review are recorded. The trace is designed to expose a decision, not to reward movement for its own sake.

What feedback loop must govern commercial investments after initial capital sign-off?

The three stages in Kopmann's business-case-control construct provide a useful rhythm for the trace:

- 1 Initial review. Before approval, connect the intelligence position to the decision and rewrite the benefit as an assumption. Note what would make the case weaker.
- 2 Ongoing monitoring. During execution, revisit the source position, the assumption, and the resource constraint. Monitoring should be able to change scope, urgency, sequence, or continuation when the case moves.
- 3 Post-project tracking. After completion, check whether the benefit materialised, whether the effort or constraint was understated, and what the portfolio should learn. The result belongs to the business case, not only to the delivery report.

The rhythm is not a universal operating model extracted from the two papers. It is a disciplined way to use their different boundaries. Cavallo keeps attention on how intelligence is positioned in the strategy process. Kopmann keeps attention on the life of the business case after approval. The trace places the source and the assumption inside that life without claiming that either study tested the resulting template.

How should teams audit an approved business case before the next executive review?

- 1 Choose one approved business case and one material intelligence item. Do not begin with a whole library.
- 2 Write the decision link in a verb: continue, delay, fund, stop, sequence, price, enter, or monitor.
- 3 Rewrite the main benefit or constraint with a denominator and time window. If the team cannot do this, record the assumption as unresolved.
- 4 Name the owner and confirm the authority to revise, continue, or stop.
- 5 Set one post-approval test and its baseline before the next resource commitment.
- 6 At the review date, record the result, interpretation, and action. If nothing changed, say why. If the assumption failed, do not rewrite the original case to make the result look expected.

The goal is not to turn every intelligence note into a committee artifact. It is to make one material decision traceable enough that the portfolio can learn from it. Once that row exists, the team can decide whether the control is proportionate, whether the source was useful, and whether the business case deserves another commitment.

Competitive intelligence becomes consequential at the point where an organisation can say what it changed, what assumption it tested, and what it did when the result arrived. Business-case control becomes real at the point where the approved story remains open to revision. Similarly, post-merger integration shows that knowledge transfer is asset retention with a receiving context, because acquired capabilities cannot function without an absorptive operational environment. Keep the studies separate, join them through a visible trace, and let the later result carry its own weight.

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