

# Career Expectations for the GIS Professional: Government



When deciding on where to focus one's GIS career, it is important to consider the advice from people who have already established themselves in the industry. In the following article, which is the first in a series, Tim Hayes shares some insights on GIS careers in government. As a GIS manager at City of San Jose local authority in California, Tim, together with his colleagues, serve over one million

residents on a daily basis, and thereby help ensure that Silicon Valley remains the innovation powerhouse that it is.

This is the first in a series of three articles pertaining to what you can expect as a GIS Professional on a chosen career path. Part one focuses on what a geospatialist can expect if they choose a career in government, while parts two and three refer specifically to the private and utility sectors.

## What can I expect as a GIS Professional if I choose a career in government?

Most people who choose to work in government do so because they are civic-minded in nature and because they appreciate the relatively high level of job security, salary, and pension benefits which is on offer. Furthermore, for the GIS professional, the government can provide you with the greatest variety of career opportunities.

However, there are four additional aspects to consider when deciding on a career in government. These four facets, which play a critical role in determining the career satisfaction of the GIS professional include: motivation, funding, people, and innovation. Let's explore these in more detail.

### 1. Motivation

It is important to understand that it takes a long time to get things done in government. If, in the case of the private sector, it takes a day to do something, expect the same thing to take a week, or longer, in government. This is simply because a certain organisational inertia exists across all levels of government. Since, in my opinion, few people in government are as intrinsically motivated like the GIS professional, he/she must be sure to temper enthusiasm with a healthy dose of reality about the nature of a government department.

### 2. Funding

As early as possible, when considering a career as a government GIS professional, the first bit of research one needs to do is to find out how the GIS position is funded. Is there a budget for the GIS program, and if so, how much is it? Is it funded through property/sales taxes, grants, or special fees? This funding of the position is the key. If it is funded using property/sales taxes then it will be subject to economic volatility, with the risk of layoff higher relative to other positions which do not use this fund source. If the position is funded by grants then you should be prepared for even more risk since the position may only last for a few months or years. If, however, the position is funded by special fees, including utility fees (e.g. water, sewer, electric, gas, parking, etc.), then odds are it is safe and secure, with enough money for GIS to flourish.

### 3. People

This is where the GIS professional can expect to find varying levels of frustration and satisfaction. Remember that most of the people you will work with in government have no plans to leave unless they retire. This means that, unlike in the private sector which emphasises the importance of being a 'team player', you may be forced to get along with people whom you would normally not get along with. Just as with a roommate whom you may not like, you must find a way to live with one another.

In government, it is nearly impossible to fire anyone for reasons of incompetence or indolence, and, even in the case of breaking the law, dismissal can be very difficult. Given this circumstance, you should be prepared to encounter many poorly motivated people. If you do a

good job, expect nothing more than a handshake for a job well done. In addition, managers are generally promoted based on patronage, not their abilities or skills. This will result in the not uncommon situation of you being supervised by someone who may neither understand your capabilities, nor be interested in them. In government, despite the ubiquity of GIS, oddly enough, if you are supervised by someone who knows about GIS and its potential, then you should consider yourself lucky.

## 4. Innovation

For better or worse, in government, the status quo is the order of the day. Status quo is about working in silos and about avoiding risk. It is best demonstrated by the tendency of managers to hire private consultants to tell them what you may already know. Ultimately, it is about doing things the way they have always been done. This is counter to the philosophy of GIS, a discipline which thrives on innovation, sharing, and being led by people who relish change. Therefore, GIS professionals who are considering a career in government should expect to deal with the pushback on anything that disrupts the status quo. This is not necessarily a bad thing - it is simply reality. As the GIS professional, it will be up to you to develop anti-status quo and pro-innovation agendas that will affect positive change in the organisation.

## The Positives

Despite the abovementioned dichotomies, a GIS career in government can be a very rewarding one. Most of the people will greatly appreciate what you are able to do for them, and they will be sure to let you know. Due of the low employee turnover, you will build positive relationships that will span your entire career and will prove extremely useful to your endeavors in the GIS realm. GIS in government offers excellent growth potential from the professional and technical aspect; there is a good chance you will be involved in improving business processes, working with large Enterprise GIS databases, participating in web mapping development, and everything else GIS can offer. The greatest benefits are intangible; working as a government geospatialist provides career stability, time to learn/experiment, and, most importantly (thanks to its relatively forgiving environment), an opportunity to learn from mistakes.

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