Â€˜IÂ€™VE REALLY NOT LOOKED BACK!Â€™

From the Public to Private Sector in the GIS Industry

After 25 years working in the public sector, Conor Smyth felt he needed a new and bigger challenge. He reflects on his career to date and the new environment he finds himself in.

It is not often that I get approached to write an article for GIS Professional. The brief was very different from that for my last article, which was entitled, ‘GI helps drive change in Northern Ireland’. That was published in Issue 20: February 2008.

The brief this time was quite simple: to provide a personal account of my experiences in moving from a long-standing career spanning nearly 25 years working largely in public sector organisations, into a role within a recently established, small commercial enterprise.

Looking back over the last two decades or so, it goes without saying that a lot has happened! Not only with respect to my career progression, but the very industry and sectors that I have worked in have changed immensely; as has, of course, the inexorable pace of technology and societal change.

From a personal perspective, what is immediately evident is that my journey, choices, various employment roles and achievements have followed a pathway wholly within public sector organisations.

Idyllic Location was the Catalyst

So why in making a career change would I even consider moving away from the public sector into a private, commercial organisation? Nevertheless, that is what I did, in late August last year.

I have been asked by many on LinkedIn and in person about what actually motivated me to make this change. I guess the ‘catalyst’ that got me thinking about even making a ‘change’ occurred in the Spring of 2016 whilst on the idyllic Panwa Peninsula in Thailand. Having worked in the public sector in several roles based in Northern Ireland and latterly Scotland, I pondered at length on an inner desire for a new (and bigger) challenge in my professional life – one where I could make an even more significant difference in the world. Perhaps a rather ‘heady’ aspiration, but for me, I was very much resigned to the fact that upon my return to the UK, I was going to make a change!

Whilst I was very fortunate to hold the position of Head of Research and Geodata Services at EDINA, University of Edinburgh, responsible for the provision of online services to the UK academic sector, my decision to make a change and therefore to procure a more compelling role started in vain. Needless to say, the main motivating factor in my search for a new role was predicated on finding an organisation that would benefit from my skill-set and experience. In addition, and importantly for me, I sought a role that would not only allow me to make a difference, but would also afford me the opportunity to make a significant contribution to global societal change. I really wanted a job with the potential for ‘impact’!

Immediate Attraction

Fortuitously, through a specialist recruitment agency, I was introduced to Alexis Smith, CEO, of a recently established small commercial enterprise IMGeospatial. The company works in the Earth Observation (EO), machine learning and artificial intelligence domains to develop ‘insight and intelligence’ solutions for businesses at an international level. I guess my attraction to IMG was immediate. Two reasons stand out, firstly, the CEO directly relayed a passionate account of the business, its culture, activities and ethos. That in itself was compelling. In a sense, I just ‘connected’ with what the business was about. Secondly, the
potential opportunity to join and make a key contribution to the success of a new, innovative and growing small business in the Earth Observation solutions domain globally was extremely attractive.

After a number of interactions with the CEO over the course of several months, I sensed that my journey into a new world was becoming more a reality. Indeed, the entire recruitment process was unlike any other that I had encountered and the people along the way were awesome. Despite the considerable security of employment in the public sector, I was willing and excited by the prospect of joining the company (and team!) in a role that would allow me to experience the challenges of leading-edge commercial work in the space / EO domain and at the same time, offering the potential to make a really positive (societal) change too. That was very important to me.

Full Circle

Whilst the recruitment process seemed protracted (with final selection by GH Smart), I was formally offered the position of Head of Data Intelligence, taking up my position in late August 2016. In many ways, my appointment took me back full circle to where I started my real passion for geospatial (applications) during my doctoral research days in Brazil, working on Earth Observation and GIS modelling for reducing societal risk impacts associated with urban landslides in Rio de Janeiro State.

So looking back on my short time working in the commercial world, what can I say about the opportunity and my decision to work in a small, international innovation technology company? My first comment would have to be that: ‘I’ve really not looked back’. I would recommend that others in the public sector considering career changes to think about opportunities beyond the public sector.

I would be amiss, however, if I did not say that the role is inherently challenging, but it is also most rewarding and unlike working in a large organisation. The role demands not only standard multi-tasking but regularly taking on and supporting many additional business functions. The reality of a small commercial business is quite simple, it can be pressurised, at times chaotic, but always fulfilling. By virtue of size and infancy, I have experienced at first hand that the demands, pressures and challenges can be amplified significantly; this has been very unlike any of my experiences elsewhere. Nevertheless, teamwork and mutual support abound and are absolutely critical; with small staff numbers, it just takes one person to be off on annual leave or sickness to disproportionately impact on business operations. That is the reality.

Despite the challenges and demands, the role and working with an awesome team with immense passion and common shared goals does make for a very fulfilling job. I would go even further and say that it does not feel like work at all! It is something that ‘I – ‘we’, the team - all do for a common end goal namely business and client success and hopefully contributing to making the world and society a better place. As a professional geographer, it’s certainly a sector where I want to be – making a difference!

If working in a place like IMG interests you too, do consider contacting us via our website www.IMGeospatial.com as we are growing as a business and we seek new team members!

This article was published in GIS Professional February 2017

https://www.gis-professional.com/content/article/from-the-public-to-private-sector-in-the-gis-industry