

Resilient Futures - AGI GeoCom 2015



Former AGI chief exec Chris Holcroft introduces this year's event and talks to GeoCom chair Rollo Home.

There are five major constants in the AGI's flagship annual conference formula. First, the vast majority of attendees get a lot out of the event both professionally and socially. This is confirmed by delegate surveys, anecdotally in discussion and by fact that the series is now over 25 years old. Secondly, since its inception over 25 years ago, it has evolved with the trends and expectations of the time. Thirdly, it is shaped by individuals within the GI community who volunteer their time and effort to work with AGI staff to shape the event. Fourthly, it has always been carefully crafted to offer diverse content which is current. And finally, it has always aimed at offering good value for money with low delegate fees. This is

enabled by the sponsorship and support of businesses within the GI market.

Today the event is simply and succinctly called 'GeoCom'. I've been involved with the conference on and off since 1995, as an exhibitor, as part of the organising committee and finally between 2007 and 2013 as the senior responsible officer tasked with ensuring the event was as much a success as could be achieved for all involved.

But having seen it from without and within, I've never actually performed what I have been asked to do, which is to review the 2015 event as a third party. What now follows aims to set the stall out for 2015 and I'm very grateful to Claire Gilmour, AGI event manager and Rollo Home, this year's GeoCom chair for providing useful information to help build this article.

The role of GeoCom in 2015?

Throughout the year AGI has been running what it calls "The Big 5" event programme, an approach that was trialled successfully in 2014. The concept has been in the words of the AGI: "to offer a forum for the diverse (and sometimes insular) geospatial industry to come together and share innovation and solutions across disciplines".

GeoCom tends to base itself around a successful delivery venue for a number of years before moving on. This year's return to Chesford Grange Hotel in Warwickshire will be the 2nd year the venue has been chosen to help maximise the opportunities for debate, engagement and collaboration.

Who's been putting the programme and conference together?

The high quality of the conference programme shaped by the AGI has been through the use of a committed group of volunteers from diverse backgrounds. As a team, they work throughout the preceding months along with the permanent AGI staff who focus on logistics and delivery. This formula has been around for many years and has the strength of largely retaining volunteers who then develop great conference running experience by volunteering for more than one conference (in some cases many conferences), but also there is sufficient churn of places to bring new enthusiasts into the team alongside the veterans.

This year sees a good mix of keen veterans and new faces and they all deserve recognition. Note that being a New AWG Volunteer may not mean an individual hasn't volunteered extensively in other areas of the AGI's work.

What now follows is a structured series of questions I put to GeoCom 2015 Chair, Rollo Home, with his answers.

What is the thinking behind the conference theme 'Resilient Futures'?

We live in a time of unprecedented change, and put simply, Resilience is the ability to maintain continuity through disruption, while also increasing our capacity to adapt. So in this world of increasing populations and urbanisation, diminishing natural and financial resources, and a backdrop of a changing climate, our ability to maintain, and even improve, our quality of living will depend entirely on our ability to adapt to these changes.

Tell me more about the keynote speakers and why they were invited?

As it is a world of change we're delighted to have the new CEO's of Esri UK (Stuart Bonthron) and Ordnance Survey (Nigel Clifford) presenting their future visions for their respective companies. It is exciting times for both these principal sponsors, companies that, I'm pleased to add, have long supported GeoCom. In addition, we have Mark Bew, Chair of the Government Task Group on BIM and author of the Digital Built Britain Strategy (DBB). The Level 3 DBB project is a joint Government-Industry programme designed to define and deliver a catalyst for a digital economy in the built environment. As such it's one of the largest examples of market adaption currently with annual

savings to UK government in the region of £1.2bn per annum already. Sir Alan Wilson, the Chair of the Government of Science committee on the Future of Cities will also be providing a contextual overview. And, as we had last year, there are some more unexpected speakers, which are to be announced shortly... but I can tell you that Peter Gibbs, Met Office and popular BBC weather man will be providing us with a unique insight into weather adaption.

In addition to the keynotes, we also have a wide range of invited speakers. Most, if not all, of the conference sessions are being hosted by one of the AGI Special Interest Groups (SIG) that will be presenting a range of speakers, or panel debates on the key issues relevant to their areas of interest. There are also sessions from the Eclipse Foundation, The Standards Forum and the Defra Network.

What general conference content and activities are available (for example, conference streaming, hands-on sessions, etc)?

The main conference covers two days, with the first focused on some of the relevant 'ingredients' needed by the geomatician of today. This includes sessions on Big Data, Internet of Things and Earth Observation, where we examine the changes that these new types of sensors will inevitably bring to the data landscape. We will also look at the role of Visualisation and effective ways to communicate the new complex datasets that we are now all collecting. Policy is a continuing theme as we look at the context that our industry has to operate within (for example, can we really continue to ignore INSPIRE as we near the next Phase 2 milestone?), as well as the influence we can have on informing decision makers. There are also some perennial issues such as core referencing geographies (hosted by the AGI Addressing SIG).

On the second day, a number of the sessions will be active Big Debates where a chair will seek the views of panel members on specific topics. We're hoping for some lively discussion and lots of audience participation. And to keep the pace up, there are a number of lightning pitches – 15minute slots. In addition to the conference sessions, there are hands-on training opportunities from Esri UK, Ordnance Survey and we're really pleased to welcome back Kingston University. People will be able to book their place on the training on the day.

What networking and social opportunities are there?

In a word? Lots! In response to direct delegate feedback, we have extended the refreshment periods and lunch – not because people want more coffee or food, but because they want to talk. In addition, there are three more formal evening sessions that people are encouraged to meet old and new colleagues.

Additionally, there are some excellent spa and fitness facilities which are available to those staying on site (see www.qhotels.co.uk/ourlocations/chesfordgrange/ for details). Finally, if you're a runner, bring your kit as there will be an early morning 'meeting' on the track (something that started last year possibly under the influence of our guest speaker Mara Yamauchi).

Who should attend and why?

There is literally something for everyone at GeoCom. From those starting out in their careers to the seasoned professionals, the content is wide enough and diverse enough to offer new insights and perspectives on the industry. We have also worked to generate content that might appeal more broadly to those outside our immediate industry, but have an interest in what geospatial can offer to manage this ever increasingly complex world.

How many delegates is the conference aimed at?

As a residential event, the intention has always been to keep the delegate numbers at a level where networking and engagement is maximised. As numbers grow it becomes harder for that sense of dialogue to be maintained. As Chair I am very keen that the conference is not just a place to be lectured at, but that there is active participation and a sense of purpose and outcome from the two days (the Big Debate sessions should really help us in that regard). But having said that we are able to accommodate 500 before our events manager starts getting too nervous!

What would you like delegates to get from the event? Are there any fundamental messages the conference wishes to articulate?

What I would personally like people to take from the event is a sense of excitement about the future of this industry. Change is inevitable; with disruption touching just about every walk of life, there is no reason to assume that our world will not be rocked by new technologies and a changing set of contexts. But with that change comes real opportunity and I hope that as an industry we can identify the positive and work collaboratively to meet the challenges.

Can attendees get CPD points?

We are very keen to support our members in their Continuing Professional Development, so the conference is eligible for 4 points/day, 7 for the whole conference (and an extra point for hands-on training sessions). However, in addition to that, we are working with the recently formed AGI Early Career Network (ECN:) to provide additional opportunities for people to present at the conference. A number of 15-minute 'lightening talk' slots have been reserved for ECN members to present (on any GI related topic of their choosing). The speakers will then be able to receive feedback and advice on their presentation style from a trained instructor. If any readers want to know more about the ECN please visit: www.agi.org.uk/news/agi/800callingallearlycareerprofessionals.

Finally, I'd like to remind people that there are numerous opportunities to get involved with the conference by volunteering for a wide range of roles (see: www.geobig5.com/index.php/conference/volunteer.html). This is an excellent way for anyone to get to meet a wide range of people and get truly engaged with the discussions in and around the event.

I see there's an exhibition, are exhibitor places still available? What would you like to say to anyone thinking of exhibiting?

We have been working hard with the Suppliers SIG and Sponsors (<http://www.geobig5.com/index.php/conference/listofsponsors.html>) to ensure that the event offers the best opportunity for our delegates to meet and talk to our exhibitors. To that end, we have increased the area given over to the exhibition, as well as introduced an 'Innovation Theatre' stream. This integrated conference stream is a space for exhibitors to focus on their products and demonstrate the commercial and technical advantages they offer. Both the Innovation Theatre and the exhibition itself are accessible for free, but you will need to register (see www.geobig5.com/index.php/conference/booking.html for details)

Is AGI still helping potential delegates with communicating the ROI of attendance to employers?

We fully understand that two days out of the office for a conference is a big ask and for that reason we've focused very hard on the relevance of content to anyone working in the geospatial industry, from those that seek to understand the seismic industry changes occurring, to those that want to get to grips with the latest functionality being offered by the leading GI vendors. There really is something for everyone. And to that end we are providing useful tools to help delegates make their case to their line managers (www.agi.org.uk/about/resources/category/%20842015?download=117:geocomjustificationletter). At a time when all our costs are rising, the conference continues to offer exceptional value for money above and beyond anything else in the market.

And Finally. . .

Just reading the AGI website, depending on which option to attend , prices range from free passes to enter just the exhibition through to rates (depending on status) for part of the conference, to very good value all in packages to access everything the conference offers content-wise, plus the social programme, food, refreshment and two night's accommodation.

To stay ahead, keep an eye of the conference details at the AGI website: www.agi.org.uk/events

This article was published in GIS Professional October 2015