

Solving the Productivity Puzzle and GeoCom 2018



As the UK struggles to keep up with our neighbours in improving our productivity, our government is increasingly turning its eye to the role of data. Nothing can emphasise this further than the discussion paper “The Economic Value of Data” published by HM Treasury in July*. This follows a number of announcements in recent months – from the opening up of OS MasterMap (which readers may have spotted and indeed was the topic of a well-received AGI webinar) to investments in AI. But taking a step back – what is the role of geospatial data in making the UK more productive?

Productivity at an economic level is driven by complex factors, but as a concept it's fairly simple – the amount of output per hour worked. Productivity in the UK is a particular focus of the government. Our “Productivity Puzzle” - the gap between our productivity trend rate

and actual performance - is larger for the UK than the rest of the G7**.

In simple terms, there are two sets of opportunities to improve productivity. The first is to “sharpen the saw”. That is, making efficiency improvements through investment in our tools. We know that use of geospatial data, well applied, has the potential to support many businesses across the UK and internationally. HM Treasury note that data has the ability to support new products and processes; international trade; and new business models – amongst others.

In an environment to support effective use of geospatial information, this requires investment in ensuring maximum efficiency through having in place a world class infrastructure, skills and knowledge to achieve more with less. These are all areas where AGI welcomes a focus from government to support the activities that many of our members have been driving. There are opportunities to build on current progress, enhancing this through greater co-ordination and investment. What could realising the currently untapped potential of a world class geospatial infrastructure deliver for the UK?

The second strand is innovation. Productivity can be achieved through using geographic information in more efficient and productive ways – in new ways which did not previously exist. We've seen the emergence of the Innovation Catapults in the UK and Geovation, but how could this go further? It feels as if we are still hitting only the tip of the iceberg in supporting innovation in the use of geographic information.

There is an urgent need for both investing in the foundations for a strong geospatial sector and supporting innovation to best use the assets we have within the UK, if we are to maintain a world class position in our expertise in geospatial, data science and the wider digital economy. The Economic Value of Data discussion paper comments on five challenges which must be addressed to do so – addressing ownership and control of data; maintaining protection of personal data; openness in public sector data; driving interoperability and standards; and enable safe, legal data sharing. None of these will be unfamiliar to our community and indeed we see many of these such as accessibility, ownership and standards as persistent themes since AGI was established.

It can be all too easy to assume that answers to address these challenges can be left to entrepreneurs, but let's not forget that GPS began as a US military funded programme in the 1970s, and the innovation which makes the iPhone a smartphone was also publically funded. Within geospatial, we see many promising activities which are beginning to build a new momentum and an opportunity with the advent of the Geospatial Commission to tackle these through a new channel. This leads us back to the question, I posed at the opening of our Breakfast Briefing on the role of the Geospatial Commission in February 2018 - if government can intervene to grow the value of geospatial information in the UK, what should this look like?

This year, our annual conference, GeoCom, focuses on the Productivity Puzzle. We'll be examining the opportunities where a strong and thriving geospatial ecosystem can support the UK. We'll be hearing from both policymakers and leading private sector innovators on their perspectives, on how we can realise this. I hope you'll join us on 8 November in London to bring your own views on how we can solve the puzzle together.

References

* <https://bit.ly/2vpv03a>

** <https://bit.ly/2KBGwgs>

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