

United We Stand - GEO Business 2014



Over 1600 attended the UK's first GEO Business show and conference in London in May. With a definite buzz, in the view of one observer, 'it marked the dawn of a new era for the geospatial community'.

GeoBusiness 2014 was generally hailed as a great success – for the organisers; for the 118 exhibitors; for the 1600 punters; and, we would argue, for the whole geospatial industry in the UK. Some of us remember the AGI conference and show held at the same venue – Islington's Business Design Centre – a few years ago and will agree that this was bigger, better and buzzier!

Until now it has been very difficult to get surveyors and GIS practitioners to the same event with the former much more focused on hardware for data collection and the latter concentrating on software and data. GeoBusiness showed that this can be done and that entrenched barriers to convergence are being eroded as data collection devices such as drones, laser scanners and video cameras produce ever more data that is fed directly into software used by engineers, architects and planners. This means that there is much more incentive for producers and end users to better understand each other's techniques and be able to match the technology to the asset management and decision making requirements of the end users. The exhibition and many product and service seminars were all free – there was a typical charge for attending the real conference sessions.

Richard Groom has reported in depth on GeoBusiness in our sister journal, Geomatics World and this short report draws on his experience as well as a day visit by your editor and Stephen Booth's many hours on the PV Publications stand! All of us noted a real 'buzz' with all of the traditional exhibitors from many genres as well as many international exhibitors and visitors who also seemed to be finding value for money. We congratulate Versha Carter and her team from Diversified Business Communications on the success of the show and on bringing together several of the most relevant professional organisations including the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Chartered Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors, The Survey Association and, of course, the AGI. Certainly their representatives were kept very busy during the two days, meeting existing or potential members.

Conference

The conference sessions were well organised and featured three keynotes – from Peter Hansford, chief construction adviser to HMGov, Neil Ackroyd acting director general and chief executive of Ordnance Survey and Anne Kemp, Atkins and chair of AGI. The overall conference chair was Chris Preston from Network Rail and current chair of the Geomatics faculty of RICS. There were two concurrent streams with a total of 44 papers presented over two days. A third of these came from overseas including three each from Germany and the USA, two from Ireland and one from Finland, Belgium, Israel, Estonia and Denmark.

BIM

Of particular note were the sessions on Building Information Management (BIM) which really does bridge the survey/GIS divide and is backed by government procurement policy. Anne Kemp, geospatial and BIM champion for Atkins and current chair of AGI, opened the second day's proceedings with a keynote focused on the soft skills that get things done. She implored the audience to forget selfishness – the implication being that surveyors thought they must control the whole of the BIM cake when what is actually needed is that survey skills should be at the core of BIM projects and that practitioners should be certified as competent. This point was reinforced by Ian Bush who promoted Survey4BIM – the committee that represents surveying in the BIM world. He emphasised that 'geospatial' should be present throughout the life cycle of an asset. But what does geospatial bring to the BIM project? Kemp used the term "shared version of the truth" but also mentioned the importance of context – an essential ingredient for collaboration.

Standards

The surveying of underground utilities is largely unregulated but PAS128 is set to change all that. John Robinson from SubScan Technologies talked about the development of this publicly available (but not free) standard which has now been launched. This defines survey quality and gives more control to the client, but in the longer term Robinson hopes that it will form the basis for training, assessment of competency and accreditation of surveyors.

Sessions entitled Smart GIS covered the concept of Smart Cities which are in many ways BIM taken up a notch. Andrew Hudson-Smith from University College London gave a fascinating talk on smart cities at the macro scale and the opportunities arising from geo-analysis of data feeds of public information such as the (anonymous) analysis of Oyster Card information in London. Another example is the use of (not so anonymous) Twitter feeds which can be quite embarrassing!

Neil Ackroyd, acting director general of the Ordnance Survey presented his keynote on “Mapping the Future - through innovation and beyond”. Technology is enabling us to collect more and more data at an ever decreasing cost: a trend fuelled by rapid developments in automation. The challenge is to manage this data, identify new applications and exploit them. Change detection is central to the maintenance of OS MasterMap and has not only realised a significant efficiency saving but also enhanced applications for analysing data, such as small building works in back gardens that would previously have been difficult and expensive to detect. Today OS collaborates much more with other government departments as typified by the Olympics and last winter’s flooding. He mentioned the development of OS data as a new ‘world’ for the computer game “Minecraft” – see page 14.

Under the heading of Gameification, Gavin Duffy of the Irish firm RealSim made the very salutary point that the electronic gaming industry is now bigger than the movies and is using ‘real’ geospatial data on a large scale – one of our biggest customers!

Education

An education session covered the Royal Geographical Society’s chartered geographer qualification and Karl Donert from the European geographer’s group, EUROGEO, pointed out that there is no ‘geospatial’ job category in Britain. So we do not know how many people work in geospatial occupations or how many will be needed in future. Without this identity or relevant statistics, how can we build capacity, plan university courses, or encourage potential students? How can we engage with politicians? He contrasted the situation here with the campaign to promote the geospatial industry in the Netherlands, including an inspiring four-minute video (<http://geo-pickmeup.com/why-we-need-geographers-the-go-geo-campaign>). The conclusion is that there is a need to promote the ‘geo’ industries, to raise the level of awareness and improve the image with the public. One institution acting alone cannot achieve this, but if all work together...

Hydrography to Heathrow; Drones to Zebedee

Other sessions were devoted to coastal and hydrographic work in the US and UK; to global trends – especially the legal issues surrounding geospatial data and the worldwide move towards 3D datasets, which ties in with Smart Cities and BIM. Project examples included Stonehenge, the railways, maps in the cloud and Heathrow airport. The integration of various types of raw geospatial data into usable GI systems received a lot of attention including ubiquitous positioning, mobile video and LiDAR, the remarkable handheld ZEB1 scanner (universally known as Zebedee!) and a whole session on ‘small unmanned aircraft’ – you will see these described elsewhere in this issue as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or just ‘drones’ as favoured by the popular press.

Exhibition

Alongside the conference, there was a full exhibition including all the major equipment manufacturers and suppliers, software developers and educators and an extensive programme of supplier seminars running concurrently in seven rooms and demonstrations outside. There was plenty of time for networking and catching up with people we probably meet only once a year.

The show’s unifying vision was to promote closer collaboration across the geospatial community and to provide a platform that effectively showcases both the professionalism of this industry and the role that it will play in the future economic growth of our country. To cite the words of one exhibitor, Derry Long, business development manager at MBS Survey Software, the new show marked “the dawn of a new era for the geospatial community.”

GEO Business will return to The Business Design Centre in London on 27-28 May 2015. We understand that over a third of this year’s exhibitors have already signed up – including some of the biggest. www.GeoBusinessShow.com

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