An Interview with.....

AGI Director Ben Blowers shares his love of geography and his enthusiasm for exploring technical solutions and how this has shaped his career moving from a digitising role in Local Government to Digitalisation Lead at Lucion.

Q. Where do you think your interest in geospatial originates from?

A. I really enjoyed geography – a common theme but I had a great teacher (shout out to Reuben Woolnough!) who I got on with and that really helped. I loved both the human and physical elements of geography but I also really enjoyed the challenges of IT. I could translate both subjects into my then limited real-world experiences of scouting – enjoying, exploring, and understanding the great outdoors, and gaming -creating private networks and experiencing digital worlds.

These passions obviously influenced my higher education choice – Geography with Environmental Studies at Solent University, where once again I loved the combination of physical geography, including field trips to the Azores islands in the Atlantic, and the translation of real-world data to digital modelling.

**Q. So how did you translate your geography and IT education into a career path?**

A. I was lucky enough to work throughout my time at university and kept that job even after graduation, so I didn't have a huge urgency to just get 'a job'. I took my time and eventually saw, applied for, and landed, a job at Gosport Borough Council working in the planning department as a sort of GIS assistant. My role was to digitise boundaries for planning applications; it was a legacy project with thousands of paper plans in storage and I was tasked with reaching a target of 30 a day. This involved scanning, georeferencing and plotting, and the system we used was called eGGP but ultimately the data was to be used in IDOX.

This might sound boring but it actually taught me a number of valuable lessons. It taught me how to handle a repetitive task, because there seems to be an expectation that first jobs should be exciting, it taught me the importance of accuracy, and it showed me that by achieving targets you can open other opportunities.

Q. What were those opportunities and how did they shape the next steps in your career?

A. I had made it quite clear that I was ambitious and I was always chatting with my manager but they didn't really have a GIS team at that time so they got me more involved with the planning side. I was looking at permitted development enquiries and suddenly I was faced with a decision – do I stay in planning and commit or do I follow my geography leanings?

I remember seeing a job at an ecological consultancy; it was for a GIS / IT technician, it was close to home, and I had an interest in ecology. So, I applied, was successful, and joined EPR (Ecological Planning & Research) in Winchester.
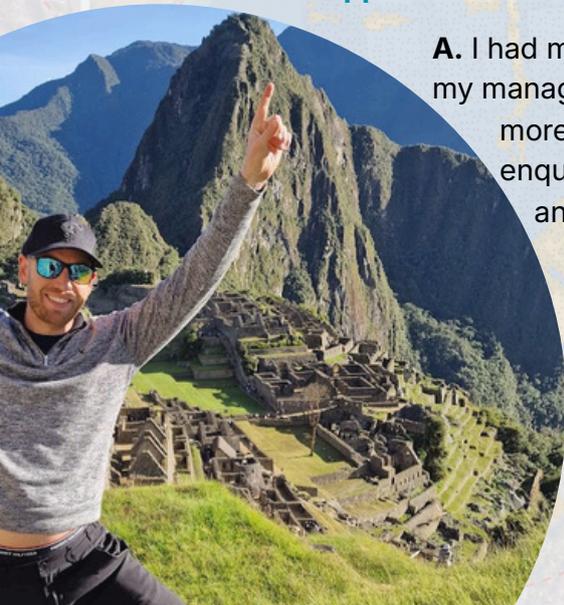
Q. Tell me more about your time at EPR?

A. This was a really exciting role for me at a really exciting time for geospatial. EPR operated at the high end of ecological consultancy, taking pride in what they did and taking on large, challenging projects. This was also the time when mobile phones were really starting to take off and, as the IT technician, this was part of my remit. I remember looking at touch screen technologies and exploring digital data capture for the first time.

I was at EPR for around six years during which time I got promoted a number of times. Firstly, to the role of GIS Specialist because at the time digital transformation was a big thing. I rolled out OneDrive which was revolutionary for data sharing and remote working and I supported new users joining the business and basically all things IT. So once again I was at a crossroads but this time it was GIS or IT.

Q. What happened next?

A. Eventually I saw a job at what was then WYG, now Tetra Tech, for a Principal GIS Consultant within the ecology team. The deadline had already passed but I applied anyway. I secured an interview and the job, plus another life lesson learned! It was hard to leave EPR but for the sake of my career I needed this role.

So, this was my first proper GIS role – providing support for 70 ecologists together with my secondary support team, who weren't necessarily GIS specialists rather ecologists with good GIS knowledge. It was also a transition in terms of working environment; suddenly I was in a shiny corporate office with 100 other people rather than the small team and rustic barn I had become used to. It was also a shift in terms of innovation and drive, constantly pushing the boundaries not only in terms of can we do this but also business development and targets.

Because Tetra Tech is a multi-disciplinary company I also got involved in other projects where my GIS skills were of use. One example was route planning a massive gas pipeline project in West Africa so involved not just ecological data but also topographical, land use, conflict and flood zones. It was also the first time I had to directly manage my own team and consider the wider impact of changes in the business structure such as when we were taken over.

Covid also happened and like everyone else I was sent home. I didn't mind but I do think you miss out on so much not being in an office; the overheard conversations, the opportunities to get involved, to push your skills and services.

I was then approached by an old Director who I used to work with who basically said come and do what you are currently doing for us at Delta Simons (now Lucion). Again, working in an ecology team, again in a multi-disciplinary company, but one which was about 10 times smaller.

Q. Was this a conscious decision to move away from the large multinational and almost go back to your roots?

A. I think at the time it was, although now I look at the opportunities offered by the larger organisations with rose tinted glasses. This was a fully remote role and was effectively more of the same; digitising the work of the ecologists, supporting them with new processes and technology, improving access to data and scripts. However, over time my role has become more multi-disciplinarian, more group wide. I have a team that handles the day-to-day requests which allows me to focus on the development of new tools and services. These have included a flood screen tool to quickly analyse sites for flood risk, a site screen tool which produces a report of site restraints, a biodiversity net gain tool to automate the calculations. In total I think there are eight different pilots.

I also lead the drone team for the business, doing anything from roof surveys to building 3D models and conducting habitat surveys with the equipment, and this is a group wide role with a number of pilots across different teams, and the Digital Working Group, an environment and sustainable project looking at digitisation and automation across the business.

Q. Again combining the use of technology and innovation with the subject matter that you find so interesting?

A. I guess so – I love solving problems! I always say to people 'what's the biggest drain on your time?' or 'What's the most boring thing you do?', and I try and solve it through the use of technology or automation. Obviously, you can't do everything yourself so bring in people from other teams and you empower them and make them ambassadors for their part of the business.

Q. So where do you see yourself next?

A. I think if someone asked me to describe my perfect role then it's what I currently have; it's a medium sized, multi-disciplinarian operation where I have a small team and a fairly free reign. The only thing I miss is the local presence, the camaraderie you get meeting up a few times a week. And, if I am honest, I'm not sure if I want the top jobs – a Chief Technology or Chief Data Officer – just yet. There is so much responsibility that comes with this type of role and I still enjoy solving the problems myself.

So, for example, I have recently been involved in building this app that allows us to route, plan, and schedule jobs across Europe for a new portfolio we have won. I have been working with ChatGPT to build a web browser tool that will take a CSV of job locations, is integrated with Google Maps, and will produce a schedule of travel options, overnight stays, work to be undertaken, and I really like this kind of challenge.

Q. Bringing this back to the AGI, how did you get involved and how has this involvement evolved?

A. I had been a member of the AGI for several years as I have always been sort of isolated in my working roles in so much as I haven't been part of a big GIS team. The AGI was a great way to meet people at events and get involved with a network of likeminded people.

I remember getting to know Stuart (Stuart Tosney) and him suggesting I get more involved, even become a director. I looked at the other directors and they were people I hugely respected, GIS managers at some of the largest consultancies, and while I thought it would be great to work alongside them, I wasn't sure it was right for me.

But it's been great. Now I go to events and I am really part of the team, rather than meeting a few people I am forever bumping into people with whom I have a real connection. Being part of AGI Council has challenged me in ways my day job doesn't, it has pushed me out of my comfort zone, I've broadened my horizons.

Q. We've looked at what you can give the AGI and what they can offer you, what would you say is the role of the AGI, what do they, or should they, offer geospatial sector in the UK?

A. I think primarily it's about connecting people, it's what I needed. The AGI should act as a knowledge sharing platform, give members, and the wider community, the chance to experience new technology or project use cases, and to network. To make connections, and even friendships, and to provide learning opportunities.

I also think the AGI can benchmark different aspects of geospatial such as types of jobs, career pathways, salary bands and report on the sector to understand growth and opportunities. We are also a relatively small and niche sector so the AGI should be able to represent the UK community, act as our voice to government, other sectors, and internationally, supporting and experiencing growth as the sector becomes more mainstream.

Q. Looking at the recently published Foresight Report, what, in your opinion wearing both your AGI and professional hats, are our biggest opportunities or challenges moving forward? How can we achieve or support that growth?

A. I am quite a black and white kind of person so I can literally rank the 6 themes in terms of what I think is important; first off, its data. Without data you don't have anything. Then I think its AI, I lead the AI team at Lucion and we are exploring all kinds of ways to use AI within the business and that's just our company. I always say that everything can be linked to a location and that is why the geospatial sector has so much potential but to realise that we need data, good data, and the power of AI.

Third place is the skill shift, we can't capture, share or use either the data or the AI tools without the right skills and then maybe collaboration followed by Earth Systems. I think AI will negate the need for interoperability as technology will become so powerful and smart that it can just integrate, or interoperate, everything!

However, there is a lot of hype around AI, it is still young and improving at a rate that is faster than our understanding so we don't know how to manage it and we are going to struggle to keep up with the pace of evolution.
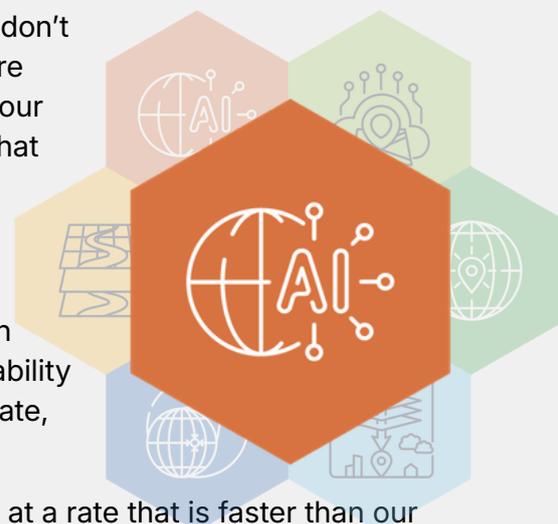
Q. What do you think the AGI needs to do to remain part of the story to remain relevant and to engage with the community better?

A. In my opinion that really comes down to the content we release and the opportunities we offer. We need to position the organisation as forward thinking, modern and interesting, we need to post things that are thought provoking but also that the community can relate to and want to connect with. It is one of the reasons we are doing these director interviews, to give the organisation the human element as well as the technology or project focus.

I also think that the Foresight project was really good for the AGI and the sector and we need to keep relating back to those themes and perhaps revisit or benchmark how we are progressing year on year, what the AGI has, or hasn't, done to maximise growth or take-up of this potential.

Q. You mention 'hasn't done', are there activities, opportunities, or collaborations you think the AGI should be acting on?

A. This is something I would prefer to throw back to our members. Ask them what they find valuable about the AGI, what other activities they would like to see on offer, and even extend this beyond the membership. Ask non-members what would encourage them to join. We need to be able to offer something that isn't available elsewhere. We have literally thousands of members so how do we leverage the content that they can support because we are the only organisation in the UK that can access and build positive content from that resource.