

**Former AGI Co-Chair and industry veteran Peter ter Haar shares how he took a need for practical, hands-on applications to further his studies (rather than the more usual well-loved geography teacher or passion for the outdoors) to craft an international career in geo spanning four decades. He talks about roles at the UN and World Bank and also how he helped an orphanage in Tanzania access running water.**



## Q. How did your geo journey start?

**A.** It was the mid 80's and I was studying for a Bachelor's degree in Planning. Part of the course required us to complete practical studies and for my first I looked at the prevention of vandalism, which I loved, but for the second one I struggled to find an internship. One of my professors suggested I contact the City of Amsterdam who were 'doing this new stuff' - so I did!

It was the early incarnations of GIS and I hated it! I hated it because I didn't get it, and it wasn't practical, I couldn't get my hands on it, and, as I have subsequently learnt, in order to fully get to grips with something - technology / management / people - I have to do it, I'm not a theory person. Funnily enough I became the Head of Geospatial for Amsterdam 15 years later.

Then, in my final year, I was once again struggling to find a topic, this time for my dissertation, and one of our guest lecturers talked about this new 'system' which used mapping to support decision making, and I loved it. I loved it because it was practical, it had an application. So, at the end of the class, I approached him and asked if I could work with his technology and his people to do my dissertation. The application was the use of GIS, mapping, etc., for the planning of industrial estate which, although de rigueur now, was at the time in its absolute infancy.

Having completed my studies I then stayed on, in the role of GIS consultant, and you've got to remember there were only around 50 or 60 individuals working in GIS in the whole of the Netherlands, so this was a steep learning curve for me, and for my then colleagues.



**Q. In the last 40 years you have had, and are still having, an extensive career, can you share any specific highlights from this time?**

**A.** So I started as a 'consultant', obviously a junior consultant but I was able to grow into the position and the organisation quite quickly as there was no-one else who knew what I knew – almost De parabel der blinden (the blind leading the blind). One of our first big projects was looking at the expansion of an airport and the work we did, using early GIS, actually supported decisions made by the Dutch Government, and that was pretty cool. Don't get me wrong, the technology was horrible and we were literally sleeping in the office just to make sure the computers didn't crash, but it was the start of something huge.



It was also the start of a pattern that I have seen throughout my career, where I have been lucky enough to be at the start of things that we now see normal or logical, in fact I can still remember the first time I put a map on the web. I worked at Intergraph at the time and the map was pretty basic, a map of the US which you could click on a State to get additional information, but at the time, in the early 90's, it was pretty eye opening. At the same time, we started having the first discussions about standards and the OGC (Open Geospatial Consortium) was launched.

Then, around 2000, came the advent of mobile or location-based services and, as a result, the internet bubble sort of burst. I was at the time jointly leading a new mobile division for Geodan, and one of the projects we worked on supported the Dutch Police by delivering location-based intelligence where and when it was required. Again, this was a really practical application of 'geo' and I remember one officer saying to me if they had to choose, they would rather have their smart device than their gun. So, again I was fortunate to be at the start of something that we now consider normal and ordinary, I also learned, in a very hands-on way, a lot about technology, about business and about management.



In 2006 I moved to the UK and joined Ordnance Survey as Director of Products and Innovation and it was in this role that I was able to lead one of the things I cite as a real highlight of my career - the development and launch of the Geovation programme.

Working with [Chris Parker](#) and [Cathrine Armour](#) we got this through the board, secured funding, and to this day Geovation continues to support start-ups to make sure that geospatial data can be used to make positive change happen. One of the other things that happened at around this time was the concept of a new UN Committee for geospatial information UN-GGIM, and I was fortunate to be one of the founding members and represented the UK for a number of years.

So, as you can see there have been so many interesting, exciting projects and opportunities because, in part, I always wanted to learn, I always wanted to be part of the next big thing so this kept me very mobile and agile in terms of my career and my geo journey.

## Q. So on this learning curve, this agile geo journey, where do you find yourself now?

**A.** Technically I am retired but I still like to talk to people about geospatial, it's a fascinating subject and one which has been a big part of my life for around 40 years, so it's not something that I can easily walk away from. I've been lucky to work in many countries and at every rung of the career ladder working with organisations that have real impact, such as the UN and the World Bank, but at its core it's all about making better decisions, helping people to make better decisions for better outcomes.



It's also all about the people you work with, the connections and friendships you make over time. One of the craziest times I had was working at Autodesk building a new division around geospatial information. It was a small group of people but we launched a new division in Europe, we developed and launched new products, and we took those solutions around the world. And, even though it was more than 25 years ago, I am still close friends with that core group and this has taught me a lot. It's more about the people, the team, how can I make sure that people thrive, that they get the opportunity to shine? That it's not about me or any other 'leader', it's about the individuals that do the work, that make things happen.

## Q. So how are you translating this into your day-to-day activities in your 'retired' state?

**A.** I guess the main tangible activity that relates to geospatial is the work I have done, and am continuing to do, with the AGI.

I first joined or became aware of the AGI during my tenure with OS where, as the Director of Products, the relationship between the two organisations was part of my remit. The AGI at the time was a very different organisation. It was headed up by the now departed, and missed, Chris Holcroft, with a full time employed staff. However, it was a time of change in terms of funding, structure and even purpose, but it needed to still be about people and about the use of geospatial for positive change. After some fairly major restructuring I went on to become Vice Chair in 2017, before working alongside the organisation, in a contractor position, to compile a response to Government on a call for evidence for development of the National Geospatial Strategy.

Once this was complete, I stepped away from the AGI for a while, pursuing other opportunities with Geonovum (the Netherlands), the United Nations, the World Bank, the UK Hydrographic Office, Cyclomedia and the Principles of Responsible Investment.

As I eased into my now semi-retired state I realised, I had more time on my hands and I was looking for an 'outlet for good' for my experience and expertise.

Returning to the AGI I quickly assumed the position of Co-Chair, working alongside Fergus who I had previously worked with at Cyclomedia.

I knew from my time at the UN that two chairs is often a great solution in the voluntary sector as it reduces the onus on the individual.



**Q. So what would you say are the highlights of your most recent tenure with the AGI?**

**A.** The thing that I am most of proud of is the [AGI Foresight Report](#). While [Richard Flemmings](#) was the clear project lead, my role in this was almost the 'grey haired been there done that', which doesn't sound right, but I was able to share my experience of working at OS producing a similar study for the UN on the future trends of geospatial information ([Future trends in geospatial information management: the five to ten year vision](#)) working alongside [James Norris](#) and [John Carpenter](#).



One strong recollection I have from this project was sitting in a room of geospatial hotshots waiting for Jack Dangermond who came into the room and tried to present a 'lecture' on his view of the next 5, 10 years. We had to politely draw him back and say that's not the way we want to run this, we are really interested in your opinions but we want you to join the Head of Server Technology at Oracle, the Chief of Hexagon, and the MD of 1Spatial, to discuss visions not present them.

And that was one thing I wanted to ensure happened with the AGI Foresight Report – that we remained open and honest to the opinions expressed by those we engaged with and our original principles that this wasn't to be 'one opinion', that no opinion was more important than any other, and that report had to be independent, had to avoid bias to the AGI, its partners, its donors, and I hope that the oversight I was able to provide contributed to the value of the final output.

**Q. Six months on, and the dust has settled, so, what's the legacy for the AGI Foresight Report? What impact do you see it having on the industry and on the AGI? How do we keep it current and relevant?**

**A.** I think the most important thing is that we continue to read it. We continue to look at the recommendations and calls to actions that were made and we act on them. As AGI Council we have to challenge ourselves to say what are we going to do, how can we facilitate, what are we doing to convey these messages because in essence it's a very practical report defining the steps that must be taken if geospatial is to succeed. So, we either have to act, or we have to rewrite the calls to actions, and that would be dishonest.

So, we have to act – we have to take on the recommendations; they are very open, non-prescriptive, but there are discussion points around them. For example, what role do membership organisations have? What does the industry need to do? OK, so we (the AGI) can't do the things the industry needs to do, the steps that need to be taken, but, as a membership organisation, our role is to facilitate discussions, to bring people together, to keep asking questions and issuing challenges to make sure that we, as a sector, don't miss the boat because that is a very stark warning and a real possibility.

I think one of the challenges that the AGI faces is its structure of volunteers which inevitably leads to limited periods of engagement and therefore, potentially, a lack of continuity. Obviously new members bring with them new ideas and new enthusiasm, and one of the things we do really well as an organisation is to provide learning opportunities beyond geospatial in, for example, management, directorship, and event management, but with the AGI Foresight Report I do think its important for continuity over the next two to three years.

That might take the form of a steering group committed to the timeframe who are willing to champion the Report and its actions, it might be a series of workshops, but what we, as an organisation, have to do is to kick-start other people.

**Q. I guess as a membership organisation the AGI can directly act on some of the calls to action but what is its role to ensure industry and government are listening to and acting on theirs?**

**A.** We must facilitate!

Let's start the discussions with wider audiences, let's organise workshops, let's create new networks and connections, let's challenge senior figures and decision makers – you all said this was great now what are you going to do to make it happen? And how can we help?

For example, for industry, what can we do around collaboration models – after all that is what we do. How can we help the sector to speak with value? We have done some work around best practice case studies and we should continue sharing this type of content to the widest possible audience, to anyone who will listen.

**Q. Perhaps that is another challenge, how do we reach this wide audience, those who don't perhaps consider themselves geo?**

**A.** I do think that this is a real challenge. Personally, I think that what we do, with the team we have is great, but we could possibly be a bit more open – perhaps look at our membership options and the value we provide and even enhance the Network Membership option to remove potential cost barriers and open up access to the community, to communications, and to events. Because, and I do believe this, people will want to contribute, if they feel value they will want to give back either in terms of paid membership or in terms of volunteering.

We may also need to look beyond the 'geo' sector for membership and support. We may also need to address the balance between generals and foot soldiers. If we are going to have hard hitting, impactful discussions around the future of geospatial do we have the right generals to make positive changes – are we engaging with the CEOs, the strategists, the Ministers? And if we are, are they right CEOs, strategists, government leaders?



**Q. You've posed some difficult questions and issued some rousing calls to action, before I bring this interview to a close, is there one last thought you'd like to share?**

**A.** The more I think about it, and thank you challenging to me focus on some of these things, the more I believe that the AGI is a great organisation, with a great team, and a positive future. However, whilst geo is what brings us together, hopefully unifies us, what makes us even greater is the individual people and their different experiences, skills, and opinions.



Across my career so far there have been a couple of things that I am really proud of. One is Geovation, which we have already touched on, because I simply love the concept, and then there's the work with the UN Integrated Geospatial Information Framework (UN-IGIF), etc.

But one of the most endearing, and impactful things I had the honour of being part of was when my niece was working at an orphanage in Tanzania. There was no running water but there was a major water pipe a few kilometres away serving an industrial area. At the time her father, my brother, was a pipeline engineer and Chair of the Association of Pipeline Engineers in the Netherlands, so she was confident she could talk him into making a design and getting sponsorship for a new supply pipeline, which she did.

And then, she came to me as 'Uncle Peter knows about maps!' She needed to create a map to obtain the relevant permissions and permits and she didn't know where to start. She knew I was active internationally and, as a result of my work with the UN, I was able to find a contact within the Tanzanian Government. Unfortunately, the only mapping they had was horrendously out of date and not fit for purpose. So back to the drawing board.

Then, at an AGI conference, I ran into [Mark Iliffe](#) and I said, really nicely, 'Mark I need a favour' – he tells it slightly differently saying he was 'intimidated' by me (in a good way). But, at the time he was working for the World Bank in Tanzania, and in this role, he was able to organise an OpenStreetMap event in the area where the pipeline was needed to create the missing base map.

And it happened. The base map was created, the pipeline designed and installed - it wasn't a complex problem, it didn't require advanced technology or vast budgets, it took the true power of geospatial – the people – to come together and each play their part in order to have meaningful and long-term impact.

And that's what I think is the power of the AGI – its that network of people, with different skills and experiences, connecting and joining the dots, and yes, the technology helps, but it's the probably the least important building block for success.

And yes, the orphanage still has running water which it sells to the local village in order to maintain the pipeline. So through the power of people and connections, with a little bit of geospatial, I was privileged to be part of something lasting and impactful that I will carry with me forever.