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MEET THE NEW BRAINS TRUST

ALISTAIR MACLENAN DIDN'T GO TO THIS YEAR'S ESRI USER CONFERENCE JUST FOR THE SAN DIEGO CLIMATE – HE WAS THERE TO MEET THREE OF THE WOMEN GUIDING THE COMPANY'S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT TO FIND OUT WHAT CHALLENGES THERE WILL BE IN THE FUTURE

Although the term had been used before, it was the group of three Columbia University professors that Franklin D Roosevelt assembled in 1933 that gave popular rise to the phrase 'Brains Trust'. Those intelligent men provided the new US President with the expert reasoning behind his 'New Deal' – an approach that would see innovation drive the US out of the Great Depression. He was an impressive leader of a talented and focused team.

For this year's Esri User Conference some 83 years later, the company created a pressroom on the mezzanine level of the cavernous San Diego Conference Centre that overlooked the exhibition floor. As I stood at the window gazing down at the thousands of people scurrying between the stands and trying to decide which of the town's Gaslamp Quarter bars I was going to revisit first in an attempt to track down my credit card, it was easy to draw the parallels between Esri's CEO Jack Dangermond and FDR.

The scale of the annual Esri User Conference is best illustrated by both that exhibition floor and the plenary session. Jack (as the world knows him) and others kick off the 'UC' on a stage so long that you can clearly see the curvature of the Earth in it, where they tell stories to a number of people that is rarely seen in one room except in North Korea.

Since that opening address on the Monday, I had attended many of the hundreds of breakout sessions and presentations designed to educate and entertain the near 15,000 visitors throughout the rest of the week. I could tell you about them but you can watch many of the presentations online and there are 100 blog posts about who said what and when.

I wanted to use my UC visit to find out more about who works at the heart of this company that so dominates the GIS world. Jack is a remarkable man; he is seemingly driven by both unending enthusiasm and perpetual motion. But even he can't do it all. Esri is a

global company and its ArcGIS software has applications in just about every industry. This trip was a unique chance for me to meet some of the Esri Brains Trust.

Marianna Kantor

Marianna Kantor has been Esri's chief marketing officer for just over a year when we meet. She heads a team of people who work tirelessly and smile through the stress and tiredness of six months and one week's effort of putting together and running the world's largest GIS conference and exhibition.

'GIS – enabling a smarter world' was the phrase that underpinned the conference and Marianna spoke with real clarity and purpose as she impressed upon me how Esri must design and communicate stories that will overcome prospects' 'banner blindness' to this message.

"Esri software can truly impact the way decisions are made," she says. "Customers in the public space know this but we must prove that in the more commercial markets. There the focus is on making money or saving money and we will need to fight hard to push our story to these prospects through the creation of fantastic content and delivering on our promise at every touch point."

Marianna's engineering background ensures she understands the concepts of GIS, but it is music to my ears to hear that she consciously wants to leave the details of how it works to others and talk only to the benefits.

For me this is exactly the right approach and one that was supported by what I thought was a surprisingly low-key product announcement during the conference: Insights for ArcGIS. This looks to be the embodiment of the democratisation of GIS – a business information tool that puts the power of analysing geographic data into the hands of everyone.

Marianna Kantor



‘bureaucracy of bullets’ to explain that location is one of the, if not the most influential factor affecting people’s health.

It is fine to tell someone they must go for a run in the evenings to reduce their weight but what if their local neighbourhood is unsafe at night or there are no open spaces nearby? She wants her stories to close the ‘Knowing Doing’ gap that exists in the management of public health services.

The infectious (pardon the pun) enthusiasm she has for her role is best summed up when she admits that she’d love to live for an active 150 years to continue her work.

Dawn Wright

If advancements in longevity allow Este to achieve her ambition, she and everyone else will need to cope with the threat that is coming due to the deterioration of the planet’s health.

Dawn Wright, chief science officer for Esri and the last of the Brains Trust, knows that this threat is all too real. Starting her career on survey boats, she saw (in between bouts of seasickness) the power and fragility of the oceans up close. And it has become personal. For the past three years, she has been working to ensure that Esri’s software meets the needs of those tasked with protecting the planet’s last unexplored regions.

Just like Marianna and Este, Dawn spoke with passion and determination in her voice about the story she has to tell and in a number of sceptical cases, sell. When she said, “What we do makes a difference,” it wasn’t for effect. The product of two teachers and a dedication to academic study, Dawn now ensures that Esri can speak with authority to the vast range of scientific disciplines that uses its software.

As the climate warms and the oceans rise, Dawn has to tell vital stories that will make governments change the behaviours of their peoples and plan for a very different world. “They [Esri] asked me to turn the company towards the oceans, which are the global engines for the climate. We are very much in a crisis, on land and in the oceans and we’re running out of time.”

I could have listened to all three of the Brains Trust all day. If Jack’s talent is for anything, it is recognising it in other people. Marianna, Este and Dawn combine authority with passion for what they are doing and they will advise, argue with and steer Jack and Esri towards yet more success, I believe.

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Alistair Maclean is founder of the geospatial B2B marketing agency Quarry One Eleven (www.quarry-one-eleven.com)

Este Geraghty



That point was echoed seamlessly – it’s almost like someone planned it... – during the spellbinding keynote given by historian Andrea Wulf. She led the audience through the fascinating life of the polymath Alexander Humbolt, who as long ago as the turn of the 19th century believed that, “Knowledge has to be shared, exchanged and made available to everyone.”

Este Geraghty

Marianna’s belief in the power of telling stories is also a consistent one across the Brains Trust. Este Geraghty, chief medical officer for Esri, picked up the thread and told me that, “Story telling can actually change attitudes and behaviours. People are not moved by data, they are moved by the story that stirs their heart.”

A qualified physician and serial collector of masters degrees, Este is on a storytelling crusade against what Yale University professor Edward Tufte refers to as PowerPoint’s



Dawn Wright