



WHAT IS GEO?

OUR INDUSTRY NEEDS A CLEAR DEFINITION OF WHAT IT DOES, SAYS ALISTAIR MACLENAN

I can't be the only reader of this magazine who struggles to explain what he or she does for a living. Saying 'my company provides marketing services within the geo industry' goes well, right up to the penultimate word.

Maybe 'geo' is the wrong word to use – an online search returned a Pakistani news service – but since so many companies and products use it as a prefix or suffix, it would seem to me that our industry should provide a simple and clear definition

A map used to be a folded-up, bird's eye picture of where you wanted to explore. You unfolded it to the size of a duvet and worked out where you were by recognising features from above before you could think about how to get to your destination.

Paper maps are still available, of course, but their use has diminished hugely in the face of mobile devices and online mapping. Digital mapping has completely changed how maps are used. Previously, the 'origin' was in the bottom left-hand corner (in most cases) and all the information displayed was located in relation to that point. Now the user 'is' the origin.

'Where's my nearest/best/most exciting...?' is the fundamental technology that underpins some of the most valuable companies in the world: Uber, Booking.com and AirBnB. All rely on knowing where their users are, where they will be and what they want to experience.

So is modern 'geo' user-centric, GPS-enabled, digital mapping? Yes... and so much more.

Finding things may need more than GPS. Oil, gas and mining industry users are looking for things that haven't moved in millions of years but that doesn't make it simple to walk over to them and dig them up, especially if they are under the sea.

The amount of 'geo' required to find the spot to dig is enormous. Outside of the defence industry, the oil and gas industry must be one of the largest consumers of satellite imagery in the world. The only way to cover such huge areas of interest is to view them from space. Supporting seismic, magnetic and gravimetric data are all integrated into the 'geo' view.

Energy and utility companies would also be close to being the leading users of GIS. GIS allows users to display, interrogate and analyse geographical point, line and polygon data. They are like the paid-for professional versions of digital map apps.

So 'geo' is now 'user-centric digital mapping and analysis in two and three dimensions that helps to locate and move assets'.

3D representations of the above-surface world are becoming more the norm than the exceptional and the ability to walk around a virtual map of a project site allows people to complete inspections without leaving the office.

Our definition of 'geo' can therefore be extended to 'user-centric digital mapping, analysis and immersion in two and three dimensions that helps to locate and move assets'.

But one last dimension is crucial to the geo industry. Knowing where something is, was or will be is now key to just about every application in the world. Turning up to a place and finding that the user was there but has since moved is not only annoying but costly, too. That means time needs to be included in our oh-so-snappy definition of this industry in which we work.

So next time you find yourself at that gathering and the party bore has you trapped in the corner trying to find out what it is you do, you can look them in the eye and proudly say that you work in geo. Which is 'user-centric digital mapping, analysis and immersion in two and three dimensions to locate and move assets at the right time.'

In other words, you find stuff and make it useful when it's needed.

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