



Making waves at Esri UK

As Stuart Bonthron takes the helm as managing director, does it signal a change of course for Esri's biggest national distributor? Or is it a case of steady-as-she-goes for the Aylesbury-based business? GEOconnexion stepped aboard to find out more

GEOconnexion (GEO): *Richard Waite's 10-year tenure as MD will be a hard act to follow as he assumes the chairman's mantle to concentrate on the company's strategic direction. How do you see your role as his successor?*

Stuart Bonthron (SB): Perhaps one thing worth noting is that I never 'got' what GIS could do before joining Esri three years ago. It's still a difficult message to convey – a point raised by Richard Waite at last year's GEOCOM event when he alluded to the challenges that faced the domestic GIS industry in reaching audiences that still remain largely unaware of the technology and lack a location strategy. A major overhaul of our website at www.esriuk.com is just one example of how we aim to get that message across with better branding and a sharper focus on communicating business benefits. Doing so could potentially double our revenues and this, needless to say, is at the top of my to-do list. It's an evolutionary process, but the board is convinced that the opportunity is far bigger than the space we occupy today.

GEO: *On which sectors are you concentrating in the effort to broaden the appeal of GIS?*

SB: There are a number, but one that is particularly geographically-

challenged is that of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) in the retail sector. This we are currently addressing with a new series of Business Intelligence and location analytics applications.

GEO: *What is the message for the 10,000 existing users of Esri technology in the UK?*

SB: Our aim here is to ensure they get a better return on their investment. This has been facilitated by a restructuring of our sales and support operation that places the emphasis on analysing a customer's business objective. We then figure out how the technology will help deliver it. As with most initiatives, there was an initial level of cynicism, but this diminished as we were able to demonstrate and communicate the successes.

GEO: *Esri has placed much emphasis on cloud-based operations in recent years. To what extent is this being adopted in the UK?*

SB: Quite extensively, encouraged by the fact that we extend entitlement to Esri cloud-based services to all of our existing desktop users. Yet it is an evolution, and many have opted for a hybrid approach that combines the use of ArcGIS Online with their existing servers. Newer customers have tended to opt for cloud-based operation from day one.

GEO: Esri solutions have, perhaps unfairly, been regarded as expensive compared with those from newer entrants in the GI marketplace. How are you countering this perception?

SB: Leaving the great value we offer to one side, the starting price did act as a barrier for some. We recognised that, and part of bringing the Online technology into being was to help lower the entry point. ArcGIS Online had just been unveiled when I joined Esri and while, as a non-geek, I found it less than intuitive, it soon dawned on me how easy it was to use in comparison to desktop software. Online has matured further over the past couple of years and is now critical to engaging new customers. Indeed, in offering free trials, we are seeing a steady flow of customers who may have gone elsewhere or simply not invested at all in GIS.

GEO: Even as we speak, ArcGIS 10.3 is being shipped internationally. What features of this major release have generated most interest among the UK user community?

SB: The received feedback puts its new 3D editing and visualisation capabilities at the top of the list, with fully integrated real-time data streaming coming a close second. The inclusion of portal as part of server now allows users to manage and distribute content more widely within their operations and this has also been welcomed. For developers, 10.3 marks the first release that enables the building of mobile apps using ArcGIS Runtime, and this is supported by a raft of enhancements to the Javascript API and web GIS developer model as well as a brand new WebAppBuilder for ArcGIS. As it says on the box, 10.3 makes it possible to discover, make, use and share maps from any device, anywhere, anytime.

GEO: Esri UK has traditionally taken a lead in supporting and sponsoring initiatives such as MapAction, the British Geographical Society's Geography Ambassadors programme, and the National GIS in Schools Conference to name but three. Is this likely to continue?

SB: Certainly. On the educational front, we are acutely aware of

the need to get the younger generation engaged in GIS, both as an element in the new National Curriculum through our schools programme, and by regularly hosting groups of undergraduates and rotating them through our various departments to get a taste of what GIS has to offer in career terms.

GEO: The company will be staging its annual conference in central London in May. What can delegates expect this year?

SB: We expect to host upwards of 2,000 skilled GIS professionals on several levels of the QEI Conference Centre in Westminster. The numbers have grown four-fold since I attended my first Esri conference at Wembley Stadium in 2012 and it says something that, at a time of austerity, they continue to grow. The number of papers submitted has also grown – more than double those received last year. ArcGIS 10.3 will, of course, be a hot topic in the technology streams, as will the recently launched ArcGIS Pro, and the keynotes will, among others, feature speakers from two of the country's biggest retail chains.



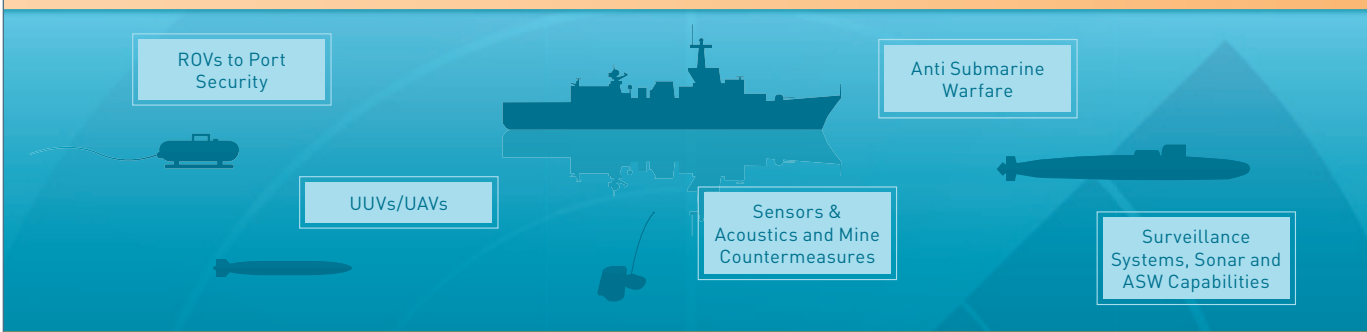
An honours graduate in the physical sciences from Oxford Brookes University, Stuart Bonthron, 49, began a career in sales as an executive with papermakers Bowater Scott. Two years later he moved into the field of office automation, first as a regional manager with Océ, and then with Pitney Bowes, holding a succession of senior management appointments with its operations in the EMEA region. In 2009, he was appointed commercial director for UTC's Fire & Security business in the British Isles and, three years later, moved to Esri UK as its sales and marketing director.



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