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Turning silver into gold

Solving complex problems of geodata management has seldom been easy. Even more elusive are solutions that are simple, affordable, easy to acquire and quick to apply. But working on the premise that ‘a problem shared is a problem solved’, one enterprising business is about to change all that, as GEOconnexion reports

The Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham city centre retains many of the features that once made it Europe’s biggest concentration of such trades. At its peak in the early 1900s, it encompassed an area of 264 acres, employed more than 30,000 people, and produced 40% of all jewellery made in the UK. It still boasts the world’s largest Assay Office, but new creativity is at work behind many of the listed building façades.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Northwood Street and where, in a former silversmith’s workshop, geospatial solutions provider miso is busy satisfying some distinctively 21st Century needs.

Indeed, the business is just weeks from launching its next innovation, DataFlow, a SaaS mechanism that aggregates feedback from users and creates generic workflows to common problems, whether they relate to data transformation or the difficulties in, say, integrating a CRM with a billing system. The workflows will be available to all via an online

store, much in the same way as apps are served from Google Play or the Apple Store. Some will be free, but even those offered on a pay-and-play basis will be at a fraction of the cost of bespoke solutions.

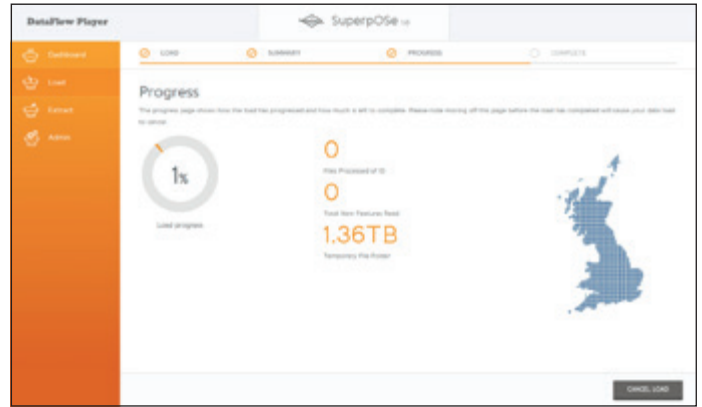
Restoring focus

It is, says managing director Ben Allan, a response to what he has long regarded as a worrying trend. “If you look at the continuum of geospatial software development, the move has been towards ever more complex, map-based solutions. The downside of this trend, however technologically clever, is that it too easily loses sight of users’ business needs. DataFlow will restore this focus by emphasising simplicity and concentrating on what works best from the business aspect.” It is, he predicts, a move that will double the company’s turnover in a year.

It’s a bold claim and one is tempted to question such confidence. Yet the evidence would appear to stack-up in its favour. Admittedly, miso has extensive experience in the online provision of software and automated services. And being technology agnostic, it can pick-and-mix to deliver appropriate solutions.



Ben Allan



Pictured left: Red-shirted Steve Davies discusses the evolving DataFlow dashboard (pictured right)

Tried and tested

Perhaps more importantly, the emphasis on simplicity, shared affordability and focus on users' business needs has been tried and tested. The concept was introduced by Dotted Eyes back in 2010 with its Contractor Portal for collaborative working in local government. More recently, the miso-hosted DataPublisher service has been utilised by half of all local authorities to achieve fuss-free compliance with Annex III of the EU INSPIRE Directive [see *GEOconnexion UK Jan-Feb 2015 issue - Ed*].

Allan does not claim to be the first to package otherwise complex software functions and routines as user-friendly services and gives credit to emapsite's CEO, James Cutler, for setting the trend. "He worked out that it's not the initial purchase of data but its subsequent management that creates problems for professional users. In offering them quick and easy ways to manage that data, his business

really has taken off. Automating the process is the next step and, uniquely, one we have taken with the DataFlow player."

Automated dashboard

This key element of the new service, a player or dashboard that gives miso-registered users access to the DataFlow store and processes their uploaded data, is currently in beta test. Again, simplicity is the watchword and Steve Davies, the company's senior software engineer, is putting the finishing touches to an interface that has been four months in the making and will be going 'live' as from next month (June).

It effectively hides the complexity of the background coding and algorithms at work – many driven by Safe Software's FME engine – to streamline the processing and delivery of data. In so doing, it avoids the burden normally placed on users of having to specify countless and often little understood options and parameters prior to loading. It's been a relatively easy development from a programming point of view, says Davies, and where C Sharp has been employed as the primary tool. "Where we've departed from convention is to adopt FME workspaces in place of FME Objects to create workflows that are generic, reusable, and require much less maintenance," he adds.

The workflows initially on offer will translate OS MasterMap GML files into other formats, load OS MasterMap layers into spatial databases, and process OS AddressBase data. Automated workflows to get Shape files or polygons into Business Intelligence software and to simplify manually-intensive tasks such as geocoding are promised.

With orders for workflows already in the pipeline, Allan anticipates a rapid buy-in. "Customers we've spoken to love the concept and we're expecting to create and offer up to 200 automated workflows as interest in the user community feeds back into further development."



DataFlow workflows will be made available from a dedicated store via the miso online portal



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