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Mighty oaks from little acorns grow ...

... but only if they are carefully nurtured. Alistair MacLenan visits the Geovation Hub to find out how its support for those with bright ideas promises to keep the UK at the leading edge of geospatial innovation

Alex Wrottersley is a lucky man. His spacious and sunlight-filled office (at least it was on the day I visited) is located just down the road from East London's Silicon Roundabout and, hence, he is both figuratively and geographically at the heart of the UK digital economy. It's an economy that, according to research conducted last year, is the largest of the G-20 countries (when measured as a proportion of GDP) and second only to property in terms of its economic contribution to this country's wealth.

Hot-desking incubator

His office and, indeed, the whole of the Geovation Hub in Sekforde Street, is dedicated to developing new ways of using and sharing the benefits of geographic data. Designed as a hot-desking incubator, its sole purpose is to provide the critical technical, business and financial support that is needed if fledgling ideas are ever to see the

light of day.

It is an exciting place to be with an air of quiet expectation that, at any moment, one of those hunched over their laptops will leap into the air, shout 'Eureka' and run (hopefully fully clothed) into the street to proclaim that the next huge geo-digital star has been born.

Given all of these things, Alex is *really* lucky because he quite obviously loves what he does for a living; in my experience that is pretty rare. During my tour of the Hub and throughout our subsequent discussions, it was apparent that Alex and his team understand the importance of what they are doing and revel in the challenge.

Shaping the future

Not least, they are conscious of helping to shape the future direction of one of Britain's oldest establishments and a key backer of the Hub

– Ordnance Survey (OS). The latter has, unsurprisingly, seen many changes since it was set up in 1745 to map Scotland following the Jacobite rising. But it may well be that changes in the years to come will be the organisation's most significant.

Nigel Clifford was appointed Ordnance Survey's Chief Executive last March, just two months after it became a Government-owned Company. More recently, he laid out his plans and ideas for the future at this year's UKGeoForum evening lecture (see also the editorial in this issue). Existing partnerships would continue. He said, but long-term growth would come from finding and nurturing new markets and applications. Hence OS support for the Hub: innovation with a geo flavour.

Up to the challenge?

In 2009, Dr Chris Parker of the OS started the Geovation Challenge as a competition open to anyone who could come up with innovative ways of using geographic data to address 'big problems'; "How can we improve transport in Britain?", "How can Britain feed itself?" and "How can we encourage active lifestyles in Britain?" have all been past subjects.

In the six years of the competition, the OS has provided a total of nearly £700,000 to the winners of each category – each receiving between £15,000-20,000 funding to go off and make their way in the ferociously competitive world of business.

A place to 'do' innovation

While the Challenge provided a boost to innovation, it also highlighted the need for a place to 'do' innovation. In response, and with the benefit of input from some of the industry's big thinkers including Peter ter Haar and Cathrine Armour, the Geovation Hub (<https://geovation.uk/hub/>) was born. It opened its doors last summer as a place where Challenge winners and others can obtain the business advice, technical support and access to data that will turn their ideas into practical and commercially-viable solutions.

Built between 1908 and 1910, the building was originally occupied by the wonderfully named 'John Groom's Watercress and Flower Girls' Christian Mission'. The factory-cum-warehouse-cum refuge had an impressive output, producing 13 million cotton roses for the first Alexandra Road Day in 1912. Importantly, it trained hundreds of poor and destitute girls, some of whom would eventually leave, join a flower-selling guild, and gain some autonomy.

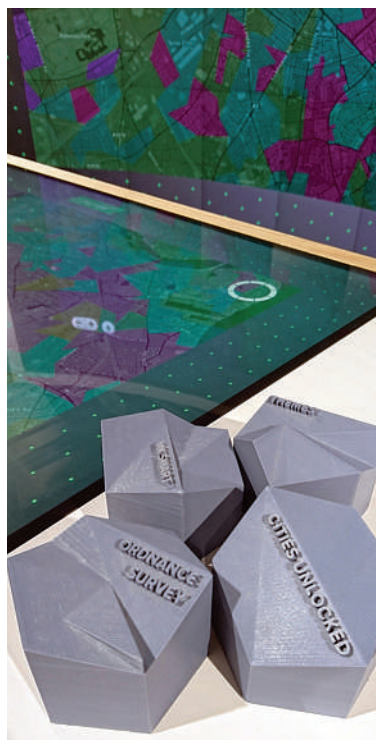
Today, it provides an incredibly spacious, supportive and friendly atmosphere for people 'to do geo'. The micro-companies utilising the Hub get huge amounts of technical and commercial support and couldn't wish for better surroundings. And 'Geo' is everywhere! In other areas of the building are the Future Cities Catapult – you must play with their display wall in the lobby – and the Open Geospatial Consortium. The Hub really does what it needs to do by creating a place where ideas and development are all moving the same direction.

But does it work?

Well, proof that an open, generous and modern approach to developing business can be successful is shown by a number of the alumni who have developed and unfolded their wings and flown on to their own offices and balance sheets.

FATMAP was one such butterfly whose two main developers were based in different countries but were able to come together in the Hub. With the support of OS data and business experts, the duo create a skiing app that removes the need for papers maps (cue the sound of fainting cartographers). The mobile app gives skiers a wealth of information about resorts - weather conditions, snow reports, lift statuses, available routes, gradients of off-piste areas – and can locate like-minded friends thanks to GPS.

With a product and a plan, the company raised just shy of half a million dollars in seed money and were happy to buy the wine to celebrate!



Learning lessons

Of course, success stories like this – and there are others – are hugely important, but the Hub's existence gives the OS so much more. The failures, and there will inevitably be some, provide lessons that are just as valuable. Why wasn't the data used? Was it the delivery mechanisms?, the data itself?, or was the intended market simply not ready? The market research is self-perpetuating and every new idea brings huge amounts of data back to the OS to help it steer through the unfamiliar landscape of the coming years.

And that is why the Geovation Hub works. The OS hasn't just stuck a bit of 'startup' on the side of the huge hull that is its traditional big data business; it recognises that change is continuous and turning a huge ship around takes time and space. In that sense, the Hub will be help it steer in the right direction

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