

Achievements and Looking to the Future - Interview with Vanessa Lawrence



As Vanessa Lawrence leaves Ordnance Survey GW found her undaunted by the odd personal setback and enthusiastic to bring the geospatial message to the rest of the world. Stephen Booth and Robin Waters, editor of GIS Professional talked to her about the future as well as her achievements.

Vanessa Lawrence has now left the job she has done for the last 13 years as Director General of Ordnance Survey Great Britain. During that time she has done more than anybody else in the UK to push geospatial information up the government agenda. GW caught up with her at the 2014 AGI GeoCommunity event. At the same time, we heard testimony to her achievement from Sir Mark Walport, the Government's chief scientific advisor, who said 'geospatial is integral to everything I do.'

What We Did Together

We asked her about how she thinks staff at OS will remember her and to reflect on her achievements. 'I hope they will remember me for all the things that we did together, the mutual passion we all had to be part of the digital revolution. When I started we were in the middle of the Dotcom bubble. Many in the press said we didn't have a role. We were also at the very beginning of making OS profitable, which we did very quickly but we also had to increase our relevance. I asked all the staff to work together to solve this problem. One of the results was the launch of MasterMap. When I arrived it was in the research phase but I asked the staff to finish it within 14 months – we did it in 13.'

When you talk to Lawrence her infectious enthusiasm for all things geospatial shines through. 'We slowly emerged into learning together with the private sector. We also made sure that we became part of the community of our industry and I hope they would reflect good support for OS. We tried to create a symbiotic ecosystem – a strong OS could only be successful if you had strong private and academic sectors. Today, all students can get free OS data'.

'We progressed quickly but kept all our staff engaged and when inevitable disrupting events occurred the management team worked together to deal with them so that staff could get on with their operational jobs. When Google Maps came along in 2005, our people wondered what this meant for OS. I said to them, 'What you do is world class. Get on with it and we'll deal with Google Maps!'

She hopes that she created a happy cohesive work environment at OS. Her landmarks include OS MasterMap, the new building, free maps for schools, GeoVation, unlocking some OS data into the open data space and a unified management team.

Opportunity Knocks

Only months into the job and Lawrence saw a significant opportunity to show what GI could do for UK Plc. The country was faced with a serious outbreak of foot & mouth disease. Back then, geospatial information was being used operationally to underpin tangible services like the Land Registry, but it was only being used extensively in about 25 parts of government. Lawrence wrote letters setting out what OS could do but got little response until a permanent secretary said, 'If you definitely think you can do something come along; you've got a ten-minute slot'.

'Those ten minutes were vital because everybody suddenly got it', she says. The accurate location would assist in making sure that the vets, who were coming from all over Europe, would be able to locate the farms and at the same time, there would be a better understanding of the spread of the disease. 'Mapping for a strategic common operating picture was new, whereas today with the Olympics, last winter's floods etc, it is an essential part of the underpinning framework of the infrastructure of our country.'

Had she experienced any disappointments? 'I will always be frustrated that there aren't 64m people out there thinking that geospatial underpins every decision they make – whether they got their water this morning, their phone signal, the traffic lights changed in the right sequence for the school crossing. Those 64m depend on it. Geospatial is now inside every decision.'

Now for the Rest of the Globe

Since 2011 Lawrence has been co-chair of the UN-GGIM, the UN's initiative on global geospatial information management. What attracted

her to this? 'I have always been passionate about geospatial, inspired by a geography teacher. Invited by the British Government and some 90 other countries, she became the first co-chair of UN-GGM. 'Since then we have developed a good understanding that authoritative and maintained geospatial data is an essential requirement for underpinning the infrastructure of nations and is essential for good governance.'

We asked about the elevator pitch: you have a few minutes in the lift at UN hq and the ambassador for a newly elected government, intent on making savings, asks why he should support UN-GGIM. 'I would convince him of the economic benefits. If they want to make savings they must have good geospatial data. Also the economic stimulus. 72% of the world doesn't have good land registration systems; as a result, they can't get loans, they can't start businesses or stimulate growth. A geographical base is vital for good land tenure. It's about optimally using the loans you could get, to build infrastructure.'

So how many world leaders really get it, we asked? 'Probably about 70, there may be more, even 100 who understand the importance of geospatial across the board from developed to developing countries.'

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<https://www.gim-international.com/content/article/achievements-and-looking-to-the-future-interview-with-vanessa-lawrence>
