

Knowing What we Need to Know

The defining characteristic of GIS, and all things technologically driven, is that change is endemic: what was world-class two years ago is no longer so. It is not just the technology; improved processes and wholly new things can be done that were not possible yesterday.

Behind the Curve

Failure to keep up to date renders you ineffective. In countries where GIS practitioners enjoy professional status, you lose it if you do not demonstrate your 'continuing professional development'. If you have slipped out of date you cannot be 'an intelligent customer' when purchasing software and services or employing people. The problem is the seemingly infinite amount to keep up to date with. Of course, we GIS folk are not alone in this; the standard doctor in the UK should apparently be reading nineteen papers a day to stay up there! All of this was brought forcefully home to me some weeks ago, when I took part in a conference at the National Centre for Geocomputation - superbly funded by the Irish government - in Maynooth. Having for many years been a part-time GIS person with other roles, I was not surprised to find I was 'behind the curve'.

Experts as Tutors

It now seems to me that there are two 'known unknowns': what do you need to know and, secondly, how best to get to know it? The only way I can find of efficiently establishing the first is to talk to other people in the field. So in Maynooth I spent much time talking to people like Martin Charlton, Stuart Fotheringham, Michael Goodchild, Paul Longley and David Maguire, and sucked out of them their views on key developments. You can, I suppose, get this by browsing the web, but using experts as a filtering system and as tutors is much better. Of course, it's important to pick the right conference to attend. It needs to cover a range of topics and have excellent speakers who are prepared to talk freely one-to-one (though it is good practice to buy them a drink!)

Far From Dead

But how do you continue to satisfy this need after the warm glow and immersion of the conference is over? Most textbooks are very out of date. There seem to be relatively few updating courses, and those that do exist are often expensive. You can, of course, browse the web, set up alerts to tell you when something of interest is published, and follow blogs.

But I have found that, apart from the latest academic research, the best way is simply to browse multiple magazines, like GIM International. You may only read 10% of the text, but invariably this is a simple and effective 'wake up' message and a pointer to more detail. And I find it easier to browse these than computer screens on trains or in the bath. The paper magazine is far from dead!