

Revelation

To mark my 25th Jubilee as member of staff, Delft University of Technology and the Netherlands Geodetic Commission organised a seminar entitled 'Core Spatial Data'. The event took place on 18th December 2008, with invited speakers all of whom had either worked with me in the past or whose professional focus coincided with my own research interests. Chaired by Prof. Peter van Oosterom, the conference was well attended, not least by representatives of this magazine (see editorial February 2009). The last of the six high-quality presentations was the one that most touched me. Not only because of its vivid delivery as a personal gesture by former colleague in several settings Robert Kroon, but also because he touched on a subject that has for some time bothered me and which I repeatedly return to, however differently worded, in these columns.

It is what I provisionally call 'spreadsheet management'. The collapse twenty years ago of centrally planned economies implicitly proved the superiority of capitalism, and as a result the paradigm of the free market has been hoisted into the zenith. Everything is for sale. As an organisation, you just drop a tender into the national or international marketplace, wait for the offers from potential contractors to trickle into your email box, and select the cheapest. This may work for bulk consumer goods such as furniture, carpeting and cars. However, not everything is available off the shelf. There do exist complex commodities, and one of these is geo-information.

In short, spreadsheet management means you do not need knowledge about the product itself, but only skills enough to monitor and control the human and financial resources used to create it. The process is expressed in money-metric terms by introducing transformations that convert activities at each stage of the process into the most easily measurable and countable quantity - 'money'. Moreover, every stage of the process can be separately outsourced, including specification of features, quality of desired geo-information product and its manufacture. At least, that is the thinking. Even QA/QS is better outsourced. However, 'garbage in, garbage out', is the adage. And so it goes. Often the consequences are product specifications impossible to fulfil by any contractor and loss of confidence between economic partners. Trust has gone, and judicial underpinning of economic relationships has become a desperate reality, enforced by barristers eagerly egging on claimants to meet the counter-party in court.

In the meantime, professionals - those who understand the nitty-gritty of creating products - are getting sick and tired of being reduced to a money-metric parameter in a spreadsheet cell. They are losing their commitment. But the economic crisis will surely act as a revelation.