Shift

Make data accessible! Ed Parsons, Google's geospatial technologist for Europe, Middle East and Africa was shedding light on the future of the geospatial business during his keynote speech to the 14th FIG International Congress. The meeting took place between 11th and16th April in Sydney, Australia; see page 23 for an extensive report on this, the biggest gathering of the surveying world in four years. To underline Parson's statement and further prove the importance of geospatial data, he remarked that a third of all Google searches already concern place.

One piece of advice Ed Parsons wanted to share was that GIS developers needed to keep in mind that well-designed infrastructures should be invisible to the user. According to Google's geospatial evangelist, systems have for too long been being designed for the GIS professionals themselves without enough consideration for the end user. At Google they think of tools like Google Maps and Google Earth as an information ecosystem, with all the interactivity that goes with it. A wave of user-generated content, for instance, that's streaming interactively into Google geographical tools and most certainly adding value.

Four essential qualities are needed by the end user in terms of data: it must be open, interactive, changing and well-designed. Without these a product will not survive in the highly competitive environment the geospatial business is becoming. Parsons showed the example of the United States Geological Survey online database 'Earth Explorer' for searches that need to be done through metadata. Not good, he thinks. His point is probably well taken by the community. More difficult will be realising the alternative: making data accessible by embracing third-party publishers. But hanging on to data just because of the heavy investments made to win them is, says Parsons, wrong.

Developers are in for a hard time. To stay successful they have to make the shift: keep in mind end users (often not even geospatial professionals, but simply users of geospatial information) rather than GIS professionals like themselves. Let the developed systems evolve through feedback, and integrate user-generated content instead of evaluating internally and valuing professionally gained information higher than that introduced by the user. For entrepreneurs the shift looks just as difficult: first to embrace third-party publishers of this valuable information, and then allow them to earn some money from a system developed at the cost of the company.

Is the vision postulated by Ed Parsons the only right one? No, of course it isn't. Even Google doesn't have a crystal ball. One thing, though, has to be acknowledged; they do have a pretty good sense of the way the market is moving. It might be a sensible idea, therefore, just to make oneself acquainted with their ideas and views