

5 QUESTIONS TO JAMES KAVANAGH, RICS

Why Geospatial is on the Cusp of a New Age



Despite COVID-19 and Brexit, the UK geospatial sector has actually increased its operational capacity rather than suffering a downturn, according to James Kavanagh, director of global land & resources at RICS. We asked him five questions about his views on today's and tomorrow's surveying profession.

2020 was an extraordinary year. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way your organization (and the industry) operates, and which other factors are influencing the geospatial business?

In 2020, we all suddenly found ourselves working in a very different environment – one in which health, safety and adherence to COVID-19 requirements/restrictions were paramount. If anything, it has made us much more aware of our impact on others, and RICS has been quick to provide practice-based advice to members. Within geospatial surveying, we have seen clients become more aware of not only the 'remote' and therefore coronavirus-safe nature of geospatial data capture, but also the increasingly critical need to be able to access up-to-date and accurate geoinformation for all kinds of asset management applications. The UK geospatial sector does not seem to have suffered a downturn during 2020, despite COVID-19 and Brexit; in fact, it appears to have increased its operational capacity. Governments seem to be using large infrastructure and construction projects to help kick-start the post- COVID economies and geospatial surveying has a key role to play.

Which new technologies do you foresee becoming important to your work?

Robotic indoor measurement, SLAM-enabled mobile laser/Lidar scanning and consumer-led technology with geospatial applications – for example, the Apple iPhone 12 with an in-built scanner – all have the potential to become important. We can also see the merging of geospatial technologies, with multiple data sources (scanning, imagery, etc.) being combined with other related tech such as augmented reality/virtual reality (AR/VR). We're also excited by the digital twin concept and the large-scale asset management potential of the 'holy grail' of full BIM/GIS integration. It really does feel that geospatial is on the cusp of a new age.

Is the surveying profession able to attract enough qualified personnel?

There is a growing professional and technical capacity crisis within surveying across all sectors, from engineering to land management to hydrographic surveying. I believe that the only nation on Earth producing a surplus of surveyors is Poland. There is a need to look at our academic and technical training capacity in a less parochial way and perhaps to better share capabilities. Initiatives like ['Get Kids into Survey'](#) and its use of the GeoSquad comic format might be a solution (certainly in the anglophone world) but it is also important to ensure that young people are able to fulfil their professional, social and economic aspirations.

What is your policy on crowdsourcing and open data?

These approaches do have an important role to play, but issues of liability and accuracy need to be remembered. They can work if used for investigative and insight purposes or in regions where nothing definitive exists, but there are risks if used for decision-making and definitely in a legal (cadastral) context. There is no thread of assurance (or, more importantly, liability) and the data can also be ['gamed'](#) or interfered with. Authoritative, definitive and consistent geospatial data provided by national agencies and/or professional surveyors will always be needed.

In terms of meeting your goals, what is the biggest challenge for your organization in the next five years?

Capacity issues, climate change, the sustainable development goals, training, new tech and the integration of geospatial technologies are all important challenges. Other issues that we as a profession need to deal with include career development, staff retention, economic and salary improvement and things like understanding mental health, because the construction sector had a serious problem with depression, anxiety and tragically suicide even before COVID-19. RICS is very keen to work with and help geospatial firms to become more holistic in understanding staff needs and to put in place the best processes to help the profession to grow – and to look after its professionals!

James Kavanagh MRICS C.Geog is a Chartered Surveyor and Chartered Geographer. He studied at DIT Dublin, Ireland, and University of London. With over 25 years' experience in the global land and property sectors, James worked on some of the largest infrastructure projects in Europe before spending several years working on

mapping, surveying and formal/informal land rights issues for the United Nations (UNRWA) around the world. He is currently director of global land & resources with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). He is also engaged on geospatial technologies and their application within BIM and the implementation of smart city policies. James is chair of the International Land Standard (ILMS) Coalition and is working on further research and output on issues of valuation within informal settlements, customary land issues and the process of land and property rights formalization.

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