

Improving People's Understanding of the Everyday Relevance of Geographic Information



The geomatics sector provides geographic information-based products and services, leveraged by a broader geospatial user community to enable decision-making and policy planning. The term 'geomatics' first appeared in France during the 1970s but did not have much significance until it appeared again in Quebec, Canada, in 1981 (coincidentally without actually knowing of any similar use in France). It served as a broad term that encompassed all geographic-related methods and tools, and was never meant to replace the existing disciplines it represented. Using a term in plural form helped indicate that these traditional sciences continued to exist on their own while sharing a common vision with familiar issues resulting from a new digital era.

Now, several decades later, the term 'geomatics' has been adopted worldwide by the International Standards Organisation, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, universities, colleges, scientific and professional journals, governments and industry. However, similar to the situation we saw with the introduction of the metric system, there are often different preferences in the United States, where predominantly the term 'geospatial' is used instead of 'geomatics'.

Widely recognised as the birthplace of GIS thanks to Dr Roger Tomlinson, a visionary geographer, Canada has a large and unique geography and prides itself on geomatics developments. However, Canadians are often highly influenced by the United States and, over the years, this close influence has led to many debates about whether Canada should be using the term 'geomatics' or 'geospatial' to describe the sector. Such debates on terminology have even brought about fragmentation in the geomatics sector and introduced additional geo-based terms, causing a need to communicate a more cohesive and compelling geomatics story in Canada.

In 2010, the Canadian Geomatics Community Round Table (CGCRT) was created as an open informal forum to allow representatives from industry, academia, associations and governments to examine common issues of national importance to the geospatial community and to develop a geomatics strategy to help re-position the geomatics sector for future success. In 2014, over 100 influential leaders representing a broad spectrum of the geomatics sector (private, public and not-for-profit organisations) came together to create the strategy document and initiate an action plan based on seven distinct yet related strategic dimensions to help implement it:

'The Pan-Canadian Geomatics Strategy presents a vision, mission and guiding principles for the Geomatics Sector. It proposes a set of recommendations to address key issues facing both the Geomatics Sector and the broader Geospatial Community. The key focus is the Geomatics Sector, which is seen as spatially enabling the broader Geospatial Community of users and a "geospatially-enabled society" (source: www.CGCRT.ca, 2014).

The strategy stated that the focus must move away from debating terminology to instead concentrate on what the sector is actually accomplishing and what the sector is capable of accomplishing in the future. It defined the scope of the geomatics sector as "anyone needing to use geospatial information in their daily lives and work" and described the uniqueness and importance of enabling the broader geospatial community. It determined that there was a need for the sector to articulate an easily understood and compelling identity that helps create a positive image with government, decision-makers and the general public.

Working groups were created to help implement the various components of the strategy. Earlier this year, a group of influential leaders representing the Canadian geomatics sector came together once again in Ottawa to finalise the work of the CGCRT and proposed a new national umbrella organisation: GeoAlliance Canada.

GeoAlliance Canada is Canada's approach to national policy design and delivery resulting from years of CGCRT discussion and debate. The volunteer-run organisation made up of representatives from government, academia, non-profit associations and the private sector plans to help the geomatics sector, increase domestic awareness and execute actions allowing the geomatics sector to move forward as a more cohesive whole. There is no intention to replace or compete with any existing geomatics organisations but instead to collaborate and build upon established accomplishments.

Now, after 5 years of CGCRT and 40-plus years of using the term 'geomatic', hopefully GeoAlliance Canada will be able to bring the sector together and improve cohesion through greater collaboration amongst all levels of government, industry and academia. Then, with any luck, people will have a better understanding of the relevance and importance of geographic information in their everyday lives.

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