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Nick Hogben

Principal GIS Consultant

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Principal GIS Consultant

Organisation: RSK Group

How did you get to where you are now?

I studied Humanities (Geography) at the University of Wolverhampton between 1987 and 1990 before completing a postgraduate degree in Land and Water Management (Applications of GIS) at Cranfield University.

I have held various GIS related roles since then and have 22 years of experience working in environmental consultancy at RSK group.

What do you do as part of your role?

As a Principal GIS Consultant, GIS is at the core of what I do and spatial relationships between people and the environment are central to the work of the company as an environmental consultancy.

My workload is typically focussed around data analysis and modelling of potential impacts (including viewshed analysis for visual impact), and building this into WebGIS so it can be shared with the wider project team and also, in some cases, our clients.

I want everyone I work with to be able to see their

geographical data. As consultants there is almost no part of our wider company that doesn't have some geographical context. What you do, where you do it and what is nearby is pretty fundamental stuff, and if you are going to help solve someone's problems then you need to understand what they do. I can talk with a reasonable level of authority about the oil and gas industry, renewable power, archaeology, landscape, ecology, planning and site investigation, all as a direct result of my involvement with GIS and collaborations with these industries and disciplines.

How does geography feature in your work/ what difference does it make?

As an environmental consultancy, almost everything we do has a geographical context. How close is our client's proposed development to Internationally Environmentally Designated sites? What is the potential visual impact of our client's new development and where will people in the surrounding area be able to see it from? Each of these questions is pivotal to getting planning permission and they have geography at their core. It has always been extremely helpful to have a core educational background in geography working in environmental consultancy, because there is so much natural overlap between the two.

What skills and characteristics do you need for this role, apart from geographical knowledge?

Communication skills are a big factor. Our job is to liaise with internal and external clients and then recommend a solution that will make life easier for them, and you are only going to be able to do that by being able to tease out the key elements that someone needs you to address. You also need to know enough about what your colleagues do, in order to advise an appropriate solution.

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Also, a bit of creative thinking is really important because you need to provide a GIS solution that answers the question that is being asked.

What is the most interesting or enjoyable project you've worked on, and why?

I would say the Frodsham Wind Farm - which is pretty much right outside our office. We saw it through from early planning all the way to construction and monitoring and it is great to see your work carried out to completion so visibly from the office window!

Do you get to travel for your role?

Not a great deal these days, but probably the furthest afield I have been for work is Baku, Azerbaijan to run GIS training sessions. Aside from that I have worked with pipeline operators and have supported them in the field with pipeline maintenance work using GPS and mobile mapping solutions to help them locate pipeline defects. With so much of my work being in a virtual world of GIS, it's always nice to see how our industry is contributing directly to other people in other disciplines.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to go into this career?

Both myself and many of my peers got an excellent grounding with a broad geography degree, and many of us then chose to specialise at Post-Graduate /Masters level into something specific that really fired our enthusiasm – in my case GIS.

I have interviewed and employed staff straight out of university to my team in the environment and planning group with no experience. But it is also fair to say that being able to demonstrate some relevant experience, perhaps as a temporary placement, certainly gives an employer a strong sense that the candidate will be able to hit the ground running when they are in post. Doing this for a company that you would like to work for in the future could help you line up a job when your studies are complete - you have already done much of the hard work by getting your foot in the door.

What are the opportunities for career

progression? What might you be doing in five years' time?

GIS capabilities have expanded to have so many potential specialisations that there really are a huge number of directions that you can take your career. WebGIS and mobile mapping is huge for us at the moment and is a big hit with our colleagues and clients who not only want to take their data into the field with them, but also to be able to update it if necessary. If you're more interested in the 3D element and crossover with architecture and construction, our team has 3D graphics and design staff, as well as GIS specialists, and we're constantly developing workflows to bring these two disciplines together. In the RSK Group we also have developers who can create something a little more bespoke if the off-the-shelf tools can't provide exactly what is needed.

On a personal level, the reality is that I genuinely don't know for sure what 5 years' time will bring and that is all rather exciting. I love problem solving and getting my hands dirty with new data sources and tech. GIS, and how to creatively and effectively apply it, is a constantly evolving challenge and what's not to like about that?