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Ian Coady

Geospatial Advisor

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**Royal
Geographical
Society**
with IBG

Advancing geography
and geographical learning



Job title: Geospatial Advisor

Organisation: Department for International Development

Location: London, UK

How did you get to where you are now?

I studied archaeology at university and having initially chosen 'soil science' as a third year option, was forced to change to 'GIS and CAD' when the lecturer went on maternity leave. I enjoyed the unit so much that I decided to do a spatial analysis based dissertation on the lithic distribution in the Stonehenge environs. This got me my first job doing digital capture and spatial analysis of archaeological sites in Yorkshire related to the underlying geology.

I then moved back down South and worked for Bournemouth Borough Council as a GIS Officer managing the software for the council and doing spatial analysis of transport, schools and planning applications, before moving to the Office for National Statistics where I managed the geographic outputs from the 2011 Census and developed a research programme to inform the Geography Policy for National Statistics. I also became engaged in UN work through the UN

Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management and the UN Expert Group on Integrating Statistics and Geospatial Information.

As well as my employment, I also volunteered my time initially to the board of the Association for Geographic Information and more recently, for the charity MapAction where I provide on-site mapping support for disaster response.

What do you do as part of your role?

My current role is a new one as the Department for International Development recognised the need for geospatial leadership and expertise in delivering its programmes. I currently manage three geospatial programmes around the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals and the use of satellite imagery data to support development in Africa.

More broadly, I need to look at all of the programmes within the organisation, considering how they can make better use of geospatial data and to better coordinate those programmes so that they are aware of each other. I also need to be aware of what the latest developments in geospatial are so that I can integrate these into the work of the Department for International Development. This means attending events, conferences and monitoring social media for anything interesting related to geospatial.

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

Although technical skills (GIS, spatial analysis etc) are important, the most important skills are definitely the soft ones. I find myself presenting to a conference/event at least once a week and I write briefings for government ministers and senior civil servants, so strong communication skills through a range of mediums is essential. I also spend a lot more of my time networking than

I ever thought I would, and the ability to network effectively, meet lots of new people and spot where the opportunities are is also important.

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

Geography is hugely important to the work of the Department for International Development. DFID spends a large amount of money trying to support development in countries and it is really important that they know which countries they are working in (which isn't as easy as it sounds). Geospatial is also increasingly supporting development work itself, whether it is using satellite data to help monitor disasters, using geospatial data to predict the populations of countries where it can't be counted through a census, or supporting the flights of drones which are used to manage agriculture in developing countries.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

It's really hard to narrow it down to a single aspect because all of my job is so enjoyable. If I had to though, I would probably choose the travel because it exposes you to new cultures and ways of working I would never have considered. In the last three months of 2018 I worked on integrating statistics and geography in Helsinki, geospatial standards in Stuttgart, disaster planning in Indonesia, high level political meetings in China and GIS training in Kyrgyzstan.

What are the opportunities for career progression?

Career progression within the geospatial teams has always been quite difficult but I think that this is a reflection that a) geography consists of a very particular set of skills that can sometimes make it difficult to move out to new areas (I never had the statistical skills to apply for statistics jobs) and b) people who work in geography really enjoy their work and don't want to move. More recently, the establishment of the Geography Profession within Government will make it easier to progress a career and there is also an increasing recognition of the importance of geography which is creating new jobs.

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

Look for volunteering opportunities as early as possible. Membership organisations rely on volunteers to implement their programmes and there will always be opportunities. Likewise, the Missing Maps project as part of Humanitarian Open StreetMap is a great chance to meet other geographers and make a contribution that can be added to the CV.

I would also look at what other disciplines would support geography. In particular statistics, computer science and data science are all areas where they are looking for strong geospatial skills.

Finally, be flexible. My career has taken me to Leeds, Bournemouth, Southampton and now London. If you have the flexibility to move around whilst you are new to your career then there will always be opportunities.

Why did you choose geography? Why should others choose geography?

I became an 'accidental geographer' but it has been the best decision I ever had made for me! Having spent 15 years working in geography, it is only in the last 12 months that I have started to see senior management and government ministers realise that because "everything happens somewhere", geography is really important in making any kind of decision. This makes this a really exciting time to choose geography with a lot more careers available than previously and with it being valued equally with other technical disciplines such as statistics