

Rob George is Manager of GIS Services at Wendy's International. He has also worked for Sonic Industries and Blockbuster Entertainment, and served as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Central Oklahoma. George earned his Masters of Science in Geography from the University of Alabama and a BA in Elementary Education and Geography from William Paterson University. After a brief time teaching public school, Rob launched a career supporting business objectives through mapping, modeling, forecasting, and spatial analysis. He continues teaching by developing and implementing company training programs in the use of geographic technologies. Publications include a textbook on methods of demographic analysis. Rob, his wife and two young daughters live in Dublin, Ohio.



George

AAG: Did you always plan to be a geographer in the business world?

Rob: I really wanted to be an elementary teacher, more precisely a coach, but I found it was difficult to be a male in that profession after I got into it. In the process of working through that, I took a computer cartography course, learned about GIS and computer cartography, and loved it.

AAG: So what is the life of a geographer in the private sector like?

Rob: [At my company] they don't have a job title of geographer. It would look funny to them. The role of geographer is still in process of being defined in corporate America. GIS is just a tool of geography. Corporate America understands the tool better than the discipline. But where would they be with just GIS and not geography? I feel that companies that use GIS that are not having a trained geographer running it for them are not maximizing the tool. The software still sits on an administrative assistant's desk. They don't get used, or if they do, don't get used properly. It really takes a trained geographer to help them interpret what they are seeing in the right way.

AAG: What are you doing for them?

Rob: I'm providing tools and information to about 20 real estate professionals working in the field to help them make decisions better and faster. Such as, where would the best place be to put the next store? I also work with the marketing department to help understand who is buying our product and how to effectively reach them.

AAG: How do they respond to that?

Rob: People just can't get enough of seeing things spatially. Just seeing where all the franchises are is fascinating to people here. Then I show them something simple like high volume stores versus low volume stores and people say "wow – that's so much better than looking at a bunch of spreadsheets!"

AAG: So you also educate people about what geography is.

Rob: I certainly try. I think the AAG community should be doing more to let corporations know that geography is important. It's really difficult for a new employee just out of college to have any real influence in the larger corporations. It is not easy to say, look at all this stuff I learned in college - let me help you do better business. We could host some CEOs and show them examples of relevant work in their own organization. Much of the information is not public and it may be difficult to share the company's specific knowledge.

AAG: What advice would you give geography departments to better prepare their students for work in the private sector?

Rob: One thing that would have helped me more – other than to pay attention – I wish statistics would have been stressed more in school.

AAG: What would you recommend to students looking for private sector jobs?

Rob: Many students don't have the business acumen. Seeing how a company really works is something hard to get from academic teaching, which is why internships are so important. Students should work for someone or with a company over a summer to get inside of it. I personally was not ready for corporate America when I started my first job.

AAG: Are you doing any publishing?

Rob: I met a demographer and she asked if I would co-author an appendix for a textbook. GIS for business applications is becoming a very large part of their discipline, too. I really enjoyed it. I would love to publish some of the things that I do here at work but because of confidentiality my work would not like that too much. Geography is also changing so fast, especially in the GIS field.

AAG: How so?

Rob: The access to data and the speed of computers. Google mapping and other similar sources have taken this thing to another level. It's fascinating. The data has been

so much more available and worthwhile as opposed to 8 years ago when we just wanted to know population, income, number of occupied households. Now we start to analyze so many other variables in half the time as we define our customers.

AAG: What plans do you have for your future?

Rob: I would like to get back to teaching children how to use GIS at a younger level and moving them though at high school, college levels. We should start early teaching them to think spatially. I would also like to help open the doors for other geographers like myself by raising awareness within corporate America of the importance of having geography in every facet of your business.

AAG: How did you become an AAG member?

Rob: My sister bought me my first membership as a gift years ago. She is also a geographer.

AAG: And now?

Rob: Well, I stopped going to meetings since I can only spend so much time away from my office, but I think it's just the fact of being a geographer and being proud to be a geographer. Not belonging to the AAG would just be wrong to me. Plus, my company pays my dues for me. I do keep in contact with people and do read the journals. I get plenty out of the membership. I read about spatial patterns of migration of birds that can inspire my work here in surprising ways. I don't want to give it up. I'm a geographer.

AAG: And you're a geographer in high demand.

Rob: It's kind of like a wildfire. I started out only working with my company's development department. Now every department comes to request things from me. I can provide them better and more information to make their decisions and do their work.

AAG: What part of your work do you like most?

Rob: I enjoy the fact that I can go anywhere in the world on my computer, plus my company buys me some good data to work with. But what gets me going every morning is hoping somebody new will call me and when they see what I can do for them they say "wow."

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