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What does your company do?

I currently work for Wickes, which is a well-known retailer in the DIY and Building Materials sector, Wickes is part of the Travis Perkins group, the leading UK builder's merchant.

What is your role?

I work in the Finance Team as a Customer Analyst (not a typical Finance role!). The role involves analysis to support new stores and new formats. On a day to day basis this means that I build and circulate reports on the performance of new stores and stores where we are trialling new formats, and also undertake ad hoc projects investigating customer activity. I also monitor competitor activity so we can prepare for impacts when new competitors open or take advantage when they close. The Tools I use are Business Objects, Excel, InSite (CACI's GIS) and SAS. The majority of my time in my current role involves analysis of our transactional database, but I do use InSite from time to time.

Describe a typical mapping or spatial analysis task conducted in your role?

We have a copy of CACI's InSite system preloaded with basic demographic data, as well as store locations. The system also contains estimates of Wickes market share by store and postcode sector, modelled from actual sales data. InSite is mainly used by our store location team to evaluate new sites and predict their sales, they also have a spatial model built into the system for this purpose.

I use the system for routine tasks as well as for carrying out ad hoc analysis of particular stores, and also for evaluating the impact of changes in the competitor landscape. I also maintain the store tables to take into account openings and closures.

An example of one of the routine tasks is importing customer postcodes from our online transaction database into InSite and matching them to the nearest store, this is so that the correct proportion of online sales can be allocated to each of our stores.

A less routine application would be the creation of boundaries to represent our operational regions. These are typically built by the operational team to business constraints, such as maximum numbers of stores per region, and locations of regional managers. I help the operational team ensure that the boundaries make sense geographically, by enabling them to visualise the boundaries. I developed a process to do this which finds the nearest store to each postal sector and then tags the sector with the region for that store. Then I use CACI's Study Area application to build boundaries from the sector components.

What career path did you follow into your current job?

I graduated in 1986 with a BA(Hons) in Pure Mathematics and Computational Science at the University of Liverpool, a degree programme which may be obsolete now, but basically it meant that I studied a range of modules from across the disciplines of Pure Mathematics, Statistics, Computer Science, Numerical Analysis and Operational Research. I intended to move into Operational Research (OR), and my first job was working for British Steel in their OR department. I soon realised that this was the worst time to embark on a career in heavy industry.

Anyway, I answered a job ad in the OR journal and landed a job at CACI, which was my first entry into Geographic Data Science, although I had really no idea what this was and no geographic background (not even a GCSE in Geography!). CACI is well known for developing ACORN and their Market Analysis team (where I started) specialised in consumer targeting and geodemographic analysis. The sorts of projects I was involved in included running reports detailing the demographic composition of areas around potential sites, customer profiling, mapping customer locations and producing choropleth maps. I was hooked! I stayed at CACI for 14 years, moving into the internal data and development team, processing data and developing and maintaining internal software applications.

From there I moved to Sainsburys, first as an insight analyst and then moving into their location planning team, who evaluate potential sites for new stores. I helped re-platform all their applications from an outdated GIS system into MapInfo and developed new methodologies for site research and new applications for network planning as well as carrying out ad hoc analysis projects such as investigating the different types of convenience store catchments. I worked there for 11 years but took redundancy when the Property Team were re-located from London to the Midlands.

I did a short stint at Barclays before realising banking wasn't for me and moved back into retail at Wickes, but as an insight analyst rather than a location analyst. As shown above I do still keep my hand in Geographic Data Science, but it's not currently a central part of my role.

What advice would you give a student wishing to start a Geographic Data Science career in your industry?

With the development of on-line shopping, few companies are expanding their bricks and mortar estates, so traditional location planning roles are few and far between, but will still exist in some sectors. Geographic Data Science is still in demand in retail, but its use is evolving along with multi-channel retail and the growth of social media which is transforming the way that retailers acquire new customers and communicate with them. So it is difficult to predict distinct opportunities for Geographic Data Science specialists in the future although I am sure that such opportunities will exist. It is more likely that Geographic Data Science will just be one of the skills that future retail insight analysts and data scientists will need, so it is worth developing skills in related areas.

One comment I would make is that MapInfo seems to have been superseded by ArcView and tools such as Alteryx as well as Open Source applications, so I would recommend developing skills in these areas.

Where do you see the Geographic Data Science industry going in the next 10 years?

I think the move away from proprietary GIS software in favour of Open Source applications and Open Data will accelerate, but having moved away from the mainstream I struggle to be more specific in terms of developments.