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Rising to the challenge – GeoVation gets started

By Chris Parker, Ordnance Survey GeoVation Champion

With the death of distance, never before has geography been more important. But, up until now, it has remained largely at the disposal of GI professionals and those who speak JavaScript. You don't need to look very far afield to see that our society today faces some unprecedented challenges. From the rapidly changing economy and the global issues of sustainability, and climate change to the domestic problems of health inequality, alienated communities and social engagement. Responding to these challenges requires a level of local and global collaboration, between individuals, communities, businesses and government, that has never been achieved before. It is also going to need great ideas, which is exactly what GeoVation is all about.

GeoVation's mission is to support and encourage innovation for economic and social benefit through the use of geography. Since 'everything happens somewhere' and geography is the stage on which every human and natural action is played out, there is huge potential in using geography to help address these and other challenges.

For those of you that haven't had the chance to visit [GeoVation challenge.geovation.org.uk](http://challenge.geovation.org.uk), it's an online social portal where geography, geographic information and innovative people, like you, can come together to make great ideas a reality. Our aim is to bring together people with ideas with those who have the technical know-how and financial backing to make those ideas flourish and, in turn, drive the use of geographic information. GeoVation is open to all, for the benefit of all, and there is only one rule: that the ideas use geography.

The GeoVation Challenge

Over the last few months we've spoken to many people about the idea behind GeoVation, including at The Guardian's Activate 09 conference, the Government's Adapting to Climate Change for Critical Infrastructure Summit and OpenStreetMap's State of the Map Conference, getting feedback on the concept, as well as seeking early participants and engaging other organisations that might

want to get involved.

This work culminated on 20 July, when the GeoVation Challenge element of the community was opened with a breakfast and evening drinks briefing event hosted at the Royal Society of Arts in London. A lively and enthusiastic discussion ensued with participants drawn from Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, AGI, consultants, businesses, social entrepreneurs, universities, education and community movements. Over 50 ideas were generated on that day alone, so we're excited about what you and the wider GI community will be able to come up with. Through the Challenge website, you can meet other geovators and suggest, share and rate ideas and ask for and provide help to others developing ideas too. You're free to make use of any technology or data that you can get hold of.

You only need to see the popularity of location-based applications on Apple's App Store, not to mention the fact that satnavs are now relied on by millions of drivers across the world, to know that geography has gone mainstream. After a few false dawns the technology has finally caught up with our aspiration and location-based information is now embedded in our daily lives. The exciting thing about the GeoVation Challenge is that it might just unearth 'the next big thing'. That's not to say that smaller-scale ideas aren't welcomed too. The most striking thing about the Cabinet Office's competition 'Show us a better way' was that many of the winning entries were map based and focused on community issues – finding your nearest toilet, helping locate a recycling centre. Add to that the popularity of sites like Fix My Street and Liftshare and it's clear that possibilities are huge and varied. And the GeoVation Challenge is not just about trying to tackle serious issues with geography; it's about having fun with geography too. One participant wants help taking aerial photographs using a digital camera strapped to a home-made rocket!

Ordnance Survey and GeoVation

You've probably read a lot about Ordnance

Survey's new business strategy, and while it's fair to say not all the comment has been favourable, there is hopefully a willingness to suspend judgement for the time being to see if change really does happen. Part of that change is to promote innovation for economic benefit and social engagement and to encourage individuals, community groups and commercial companies to innovate with geography. Supporting the GeoVation initiative is just one of the ways Ordnance Survey plans to do this.

From an Ordnance Survey perspective, our support for GeoVation will, I believe, prove to be a tangible demonstration of how the expanded use of geographic information can be realised in a world where Ordnance Survey pays its own way and remains sustainable in the long term.

Ordnance Survey has initiated and is supporting GeoVation, and is also contributing to an ideas development fund that will go to support the very best ideas, but it makes no claim on the intellectual property and is keen to engage supporting partners in growing the initiative. So if you'd like to be involved, please get in touch.

In addition, to provide some external perspective and guidance, we've recruited the help of Steven Feldman, who will be known to many of you, and Stew McTavish, the Chief Executive of mo.jo, as GeoVation Champions. Stew has recently worked with Cancer Research UK on its own open innovation challenge, and Steven's passion for geography (and football) has been invaluable.

Looking forward

GeoVation is on a very exciting journey for all those who use or could use geography more effectively in meeting their own objectives. If you want to contribute ideas, applications and data; collaborate with others to solve problems and create new and exciting solutions using geography; then you'll be very welcome to join us for the ride.

Join the Geovation Challenge at: <https://www.challenge.geovation.org.uk> or follow us on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/geovation>