

Getting Off to a Great Start

Many GIS careers begin at Esri



Many new graduates start their GIS careers at Esri. Tope Bello graduated in 2005 from the University of Texas, Dallas (UT Dallas) with a master's degree in geospatial information sciences. In this interview with Esri writer Leslie Roundy, he talks about his role as a product specialist in Professional Services.

How did you get to know about Esri?

Most of the software we used in the GIS program at UT Dallas was ArcGIS. That was my original exposure to who Esri is and what they do. Then, in 2005, I was accepted to the Esri International User Conference Student Assistantship Program. It gave me the opportunity to interact with other GIS professionals and talk to people about Esri. It really opened my eyes to the capabilities of GIS, how it is applied in different industries, and how people are within the company.

What appealed to you the most when you were interviewing here?

The main thing for me was the fact that if you're in the GIS industry, working for Esri is the pinnacle of your career. This is where you want to be. You're exposed to cutting-edge technology, exposed to so many knowledge avenues in the sense that these are the people that actually make the products we used in school. What better place to learn than from them? Another fact is that Esri is headquartered in Southern California. You've got the beaches, Nevada, the desert, so not only do you have the whole technical aspect of Esri, but it's also in a very good location.

Tell me a little about the kind of work you do.

In Implementation Services, we have a program called Rent-a-Tech, where we implement GIS software and provide support at various customer sites, such as desktop customization, training, or response to emergency operations. For example, after Hurricane Katrina, we had people that went there and worked on the emergency response. GIS was used to help get aid to the people affected by the flood.

The first big project I worked on after being hired was during one of the largest fires in Southern California, up in Cabazon. We went on-site and helped them use our software to map the extent of the fire perimeters and calculate the total acreage of land the fire affected. The maps created were used by firefighters to come up with strategies of how to best tackle the fire.

Soon after that, I started working on developing more solution products. My role is more of a product specialist, meaning that I take the requirements from the user, translate them, and pass them on to the developer to build an application. Or I take the requirements from the user and help them understand how we think they could use our software to solve their problem—so basically, being a user advocate back to the developer.

Currently, I'm focused on ArcGIS Workflow Manager, an extension to ArcGIS Desktop and ArcGIS Server that provides users with tools that help them automate their GIS and non-GIS processes. Not only do I do training and implementation on customer sites, I also interact with customers almost daily and help them troubleshoot their problems.

We also provide an avenue for our customers to give us feedback via the forums. A colleague and I monitor the Workflow Manager forum to gather information on our users' experiences. And all that is taken back to our development team in Professional Services so they'll know what customers expect to see in the software.

Sounds like there is a lot of variety in your job. Is there one thing that gives you the most satisfaction?

I think it's a mixture of everything. It's always good to get positive feedback from customers. It's always good to know you've had an impact on how they perform their jobs and that we help them be more productive. Knowing that gives me some sort of satisfaction and also being able to say there have been expectations set and we met them. It's a very fulfilling experience.

What do you think sets Esri apart from other employers?

I think the main thing that stood out to me when I started was the "baptism by fire." The approach is, you've got to figure things out—not by yourself, but you're not spoon-fed either. You're basically given all the tools you need to be successful. You're expected to put those tools together and become a good employee. The opportunities are limitless—the resources are available to you to learn and to be successful in this field. The technical knowledge of the folks I work with and interact with on a daily basis is amazing.