

The ROI Mind-Set for GIS Managers

By Wade Kloos, State of Utah, Department of Natural Resources

At a GIS user group last year, the audience of 150 GIS professionals was asked, “How many of you measure your GIS results?” Not one person in the room raised a hand. This got me thinking. What does it take to get GIS professionals to think differently about measuring GIS return on investment (ROI)?

This article will explore why measuring ROI can help your GIS program and how your mind-set is fundamental to your journey to something better for your program.

Studying ROI is a means to an end. In this case, the end is the measurement, documentation, and communication of the value of GIS. Knowing why ROI is important to you, a GIS manager, is a critical first step on the journey from a good GIS program to a great GIS program, so let's get started.

Chances are you will find yourself needing to justify a GIS project or a request for funding or respond to a threat to your existing resources. Even if you are so fortunate that you are never in this position, it is likely your organization's leadership currently undervalues the contribution of GIS. What would you reference as a measure of your GIS value? How do you think that measurement will resonate with your leadership? By addressing questions like these before your boss asks them, you are choosing the path from good to great. This is definitely worth your time.

GIS managers who prepare themselves for a discussion of GIS value are in a much better position to not only get what they want, but—by communicating the value of GIS value—can preempt internal threats that could diminish future GIS opportunities. Organizational leaders can be fickle, so they should be reminded of your program's contributions on a regular basis.

Having repeatable metrics and dedicated ROI workflows can help your program remain relevant. This relevancy can keep

leadership's attention focused on how GIS impacts its business, not just on the maps you make. In addition, the value you assign to GIS results should be closely linked to the way your organization—as a whole—measures value. For example, if your company focuses on dollars earned as a measure of success, your GIS results would be better understood and appreciated if they relate to that success measure by highlighting increased revenue, cost reduction/avoidance, efficiencies, and other dollar benefits.

So how does the concept of mind-set fit with ROI, and how does one define and/or change a mind-set? Have you ever had one of those days at work in which everything you set out to do gets pushed to the side so that you can keep your GIS program running, your staff on task, and your deliverables on schedule?

Perhaps that day turned into a week and then a month so fast it made you wonder where all that time went and what actually got done. I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that the stresses and workloads you face as a GIS manager can be all-consuming, occupying your thoughts and time while at work (and beyond). This kind of environment can influence your mind-set.

To reinforce the importance of recognizing my thoughts, attitudes, and actions in a busy work environment, I turn to *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling. The authors introduce the concept of the “whirlwind” of work. They claim that the whirlwind is the one thing that most prevents us from achieving our goals. The whirlwind of GIS activities needed just to keep the operation running day to day and serving the ad hoc needs (usually labeled “urgent”) of the organization can consume massive amounts of energy.

Being reactionary, multitasking, reprioritizing, and temporarily focusing on tasks

of little consequence can leave your mind spinning and full of limitations and negative perceptions. When you think about ROI efforts in the midst of this whirlwind, you may conclude that

- You are too busy pleasing everyone else to work on GIS ROI.
- You are not being asked for ROI, so you are not doing it.
- Your budget has been steady, so ROI doesn't seem relevant.
- Your program may not be as good as other GIS programs, so you don't want to find out by measuring it.
- ROI studies consume too much time and are just for big projects.
- You don't do ROI because you are not sure how to do it.

These conclusions may be preventing you from exploring the value of your GIS and its ROI. They may be preventing you from taking a path to something better. Such thoughts frame one's mind-set. In her book entitled *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck would term those thoughts as examples of a “fixed” mind-set. Persons with a fixed mind-set let judgments, fear, and the abilities they currently possess frame how they interpret situations and opportunities.

This fixed mind-set is the opposite of the “growth” mind-set. The general outlook of persons with a growth mind-set is shaped by a process of continuous learning. Because they are willing to try new things (even if they may fail), they do not accept that what they currently know or what their current situation is defines their future. Further, they believe that through learning—even if it is learning from their mistakes—they can improve their situation so that greater things are within their grasp. Adopting a growth mind-set can really help your GIS program succeed.

How does one define GIS success? Answering this question is one way to begin *learning* what is applicable and relevant to your situation and organization. A key factor in determining the success of a GIS program is to first appreciate the fact that GIS exists in your organization specifically to help your organization reach its goals or achieve its mission.

GIS is a business support system. It does not solely exist for the purpose of creating a digital representation of the world. With this in mind, the next logical question is, "What difference does your GIS make in reaching organizational goals?"

To answer this question, you will need to immerse yourself in the business functions of your organization, many of which may be subjects with which you are not familiar. This is where having a growth mind-set will benefit your GIS program. The more institutional knowledge of the business and information challenges and opportunities you acquire, the more clarity you will have about the potential difference GIS can make and its relevance to your organization.

Running a GIS program is already a challenging, time-consuming task, so is it any wonder that becoming intimately familiar with numerous organizational business units is not a top priority for you? But if you accept this premise, you have a fixed mind-set.

Can you begin to see that the more integrated your GIS is with business functions, the more relevant GIS will be and the greater its and your value will be to the organization? Think business-centric solutions and not map-centric solutions.

If you never leave your GIS cubicle, you'll have difficulty establishing the relevance of your GIS program to your employers. A GIS manager's time is in high demand. However, the time you dedicate to organizational learning, as well as measuring and

communicating GIS results, will get you precious resources and your leadership's attention and appreciation.

Cultivating a growth mind-set that is focused on ROI will crystalize your

understanding of where and how GIS can make the biggest impact and—in the process—get your organization closer to achieving its mission and goals. Isn't that the real measure of GIS success?






MAP YOUR FUTURE.

Advance your career in geospatial technology by learning the latest tools and software, including ArcGIS®, at Southern New Hampshire University. Our innovative online courses are affordable, flexible and designed to give you technical skills demanded by today's employers.

FIND OUT MORE AT SNHU.EDU/GIS

Enroll in one of SNHU's online courses today.

- Remote Sensing and Imagery Analysis
- Intro to Geographic Information Systems
- Geospatial Programming
- Spatial Awareness
- Geostatistics and Data Analysis