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The Value of a Geospatial Strategy

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The Value of a Geospatial Strategy:

A proven method and step-by-step guide on how to successfully implement one

Creating a geospatial strategy is an end-to-end journey that helps establish a vision and a path for an organization's success and transformation leveraging geospatial resources in a complex system with evolving priorities.

Organizations today face the challenge of data and analytics reshaping the organization and requiring them to pivot at an accelerated pace.

According to McKinsey & Company, when it comes to being successful with data and analytics, the most important factor is the creation of a strategy:

"The creation of a strategy now ranks as the number-one challenge to—and reason for—companies' success at data and analytics."

[Catch them if you can: How leaders in data and analytics have pulled ahead, Sept. 19, 2019](#)

Organizations create strategies to guide the planning, prioritization, and execution of projects and to help ensure resources are allocated to activities that will be most impactful on organizational goals. A geospatial strategy is a business-oriented plan for how your organization will leverage its geospatial resources (people, processes, and technology) to produce the outcomes it's trying to create. We have found over many years that our customers extract more value from their geospatial investments when they choose to implement and use their geospatial technology to solve business problems. These strategic choices guide them to make investments in technology and resources that empower their people to work together more effectively and deliver more value to their stakeholders.

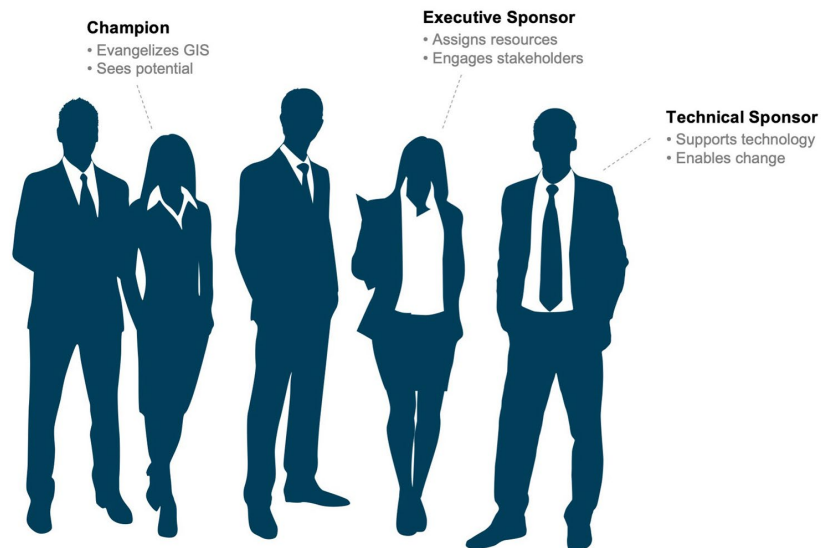
Meanwhile, implementing and operating a GIS without a geospatial strategy often means GIS is not well-aligned to what contributes most to the organization's success. To the GIS team, this often looks like unmanaged growth, resource shortages, streams of ad hoc requests, and ineffective collaboration between stakeholders. While these situations are common to many organizations, they are surmountable

with a geospatial strategy. To help you get started in evolving your geospatial technology to maximize the benefits to your organization, we have outlined a four-phase, business-first approach for developing and executing a geospatial strategy. To develop a successful geospatial strategy, you need to get the right people involved. These key stakeholders need to represent different aspects of your business, not just the technologists or GIS experts. Your stakeholders' priorities, organizational knowledge, and desire to improve the business will lead to a more valuable strategy that can get broad buy-in throughout your organization.

The people involved in developing a strategy need to fulfill three key roles: champion, executive sponsor, and technical sponsor. By filling these roles, you can significantly increase the adoption and success of your geospatial strategy. For additional details on building your team, refer to "The Approach to Maximize Impact" resource (<https://go.esri.com/gs>).

Build the Team

Key Roles Needed for Developing and Adopting a Geospatial Strategy within an Organization



A Four-Phase Approach

Developing and executing a geospatial strategy involves four distinct phases: Understand, Plan, Act, and Revisit. These phases are intended to guide you toward a business-first approach that results in capabilities that support your organization's goals. The Understand phase provides the business context. The Plan phase defines the people, process, and technology capabilities that support the business and results in a roadmap of prioritized and sequenced activities needed to overcome your business challenges. The Act phase describes a well-structured approach for executing the roadmap in an incremental fashion and the Revisit phase provides a

path back to Understand, where the strategy may be reevaluated to account for changes.

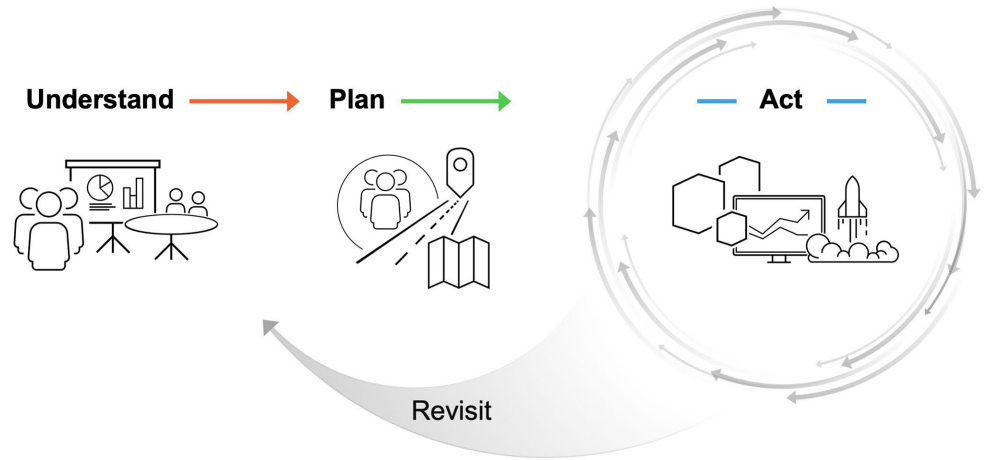


Figure 1: The Approach

Understand Your Organization's Priority Goals

In the Understand phase, you define a shared understanding of your organization's goals, success criteria, and current challenges. You accomplish this by having conversations with departmental and functional area executives, key business unit directors, and GIS users and managers. Remember that GIS is not the focus of these conversations, which means you do not have goals like "upgrade our GIS software." Instead, focus on the business or operational goals of your organization. For example, a city might have a goal to reduce homelessness, a private business might want to gain efficiencies in the supply chain, and an NGO might want to identify and support vulnerable populations. Once you document your organization's business goals, ask what's getting in the way of accomplishing them—the challenges. As a helpful starting point for your discussions, consult any of your organization's strategic plans, initiatives, goals, objectives and performance management systems and their key performance indicators (KPIs). They will help you identify who to talk to and give you some initial topics for conversation as you begin building consensus.

This shared understanding will also help you begin thinking about how holistic geospatial solutions can address your current challenges and support your organization's goals. You'll also be able to identify and focus on the work that will have the greatest impact.

It's tempting to start building solutions that seem like an obvious fit. Getting consensus from the executives and stakeholder is the most critical part of the understanding as that ensures that there will be better decision making and prioritization on key decisions. However, if you do not start by achieving this shared understanding, then you introduce several risks to the overall effort. In particular, you risk wasting time, effort, and resources, and you risk frustrating your stakeholders and losing their buy-in—assuming you are able to obtain the required resources in the first place. For example, it's possible these "obvious" solutions don't actually meet the underlying needs of the organization. It's also possible these solutions won't be utilized or adopted, because there was no consensus that they were needed, or that the solutions were the best way to overcome a challenge. The Understand phase helps you mitigate these risks.

Plan to Address the Challenges

The output of the Plan phase is a clearly defined roadmap that builds off your work from the Understand phase. By using the goals, success measures, and challenges you identified, you can define specific activities that closely align with the strategic goals and will deliver real business value to the organization. The Plan phase begins by defining the future state. From there, you compare the future state with your current state and note the gaps: what processes, information, technology, and skills need to be added, enhanced, or developed? The gaps will help you see where technology, data, workflows, or skills are needed to deliver sustainable solutions.

Once you know the gaps you need to fill to reach the desired future state, you can begin defining the activities you will need to complete to get there. Note the dependencies between your activities, prioritize them, and arrange them in a logical order. The result is a roadmap with a prioritized and sequenced set of activities.

Because your roadmap supports a business-focused geospatial strategy, it will include a range of activities that impact your organization in different ways. It is important to remember that these activities will not always focus on deploying technology alone. For example, the activities in your roadmap might require supporting foundational infrastructure, creating information products, defining governance plans, reviewing workflows and processes, providing training, addressing change management, and restructuring teams.

The goal is to define a future state that solves the organization's business challenges. Apply technology where it makes sense to do so, but also make sure you are equipping people with workflows and processes, the right data, and skills to make that technology effective.

Act on Your Strategy

After you have developed or refined your strategy and determined your roadmap, the next step is to execute on that strategy. This part of the guide will walk you through an overview of the four-step process that covers the Act phase: prepare, implement, operate, and review.

The steps of the Act phase give you a way of thinking about how you execute your geospatial strategy that complements your organization's specific project management approach. If you do not follow a specific project management approach, then the steps of the Act phase give you a basic framework that you can use to execute your strategy with an implementation plan.

In the Act phase, you launch a series of implementation cycles based on your roadmap. You need to organize these implementation cycles to deliver incremental value and continuous improvement, so you can easily measure your progress and the impact GIS is having on your business. You also need to follow applicable best practices. You can find out more about the latest ArcGIS best practices from this document: [Architecting the ArcGIS System: Best Practices](#). Discuss the applicable best practices with your Esri account team during the Prepare step.

The Act phase is not only about deploying technical solutions, but about ensuring staff are ready to use a new workflow, understand the value it brings to the organization, and understand how they will be trained and supported as new solutions are released (change management).

Prepare:

- Define the solution in detail
- Engage with the appropriate stakeholders to make sure all the requirements are understood
- Move from conceptual design to functional design
- Things like system architecture design or a wireframe might take place during the step
- Prepare end users for upcoming changes [change management]
- Help end users understand why things are changing, what it means for them, and what to expect when things are in place [change management]

Implement:

- Build and configure your solution
- Test and deploy your solution
- The best practice is to build and test new solutions in a non-production environment
- Train your users – you may get assistance with creating a training plan by contacting your Esri account team and training consultant
- Users need to have access to the right training at the right time, ideally when they can touch and feel the technology shortly after training is completed so knowledge isn't lost

Operate:

- Operate on the new solution in a production environment
- Monitor performance and use of the solution – [ArcGIS Monitor](#) is a tool uniquely tailored to monitor the health of your ArcGIS implementations throughout the lifecycle

- Are solutions performing as expected? Are people using them as expected? If usage is heavy, do we need to consider scaling? If usage is light, did we miss something?
- Document the impact of your solution – did it save time/money? Did it increase revenue? Did it deliver a new service? Did it affect established KPIs? It is critical to quantify and track the value of your work.
- Provide ongoing support to your users – create community of practice focused users groups for special topics so that users can get a better understanding of features rolled out and get help from specialists or peers.
- Make sure your internal and external end users know who to contact and where to find help if they need it

Review:

- Using the documentation of the solution's impact from the Operate step, be sure to comprehensively share the success of your activity – you can use social media, internal and external communications/presentations, apply for an award, etc.
- Make sure executive sponsors and key decision-makers know that you have executed on a solution tied to a goal, and are actively working to mitigate business challenges
- Ensure the solution is being utilized
- Are there new groups who need access to the solution? Are the intended groups using and adopting the solution, replacing old workflows?
- Consider ongoing workforce development needs by working with your Esri account team and training consultant
- Be forward leaning. Establish a GIS working group that reviews the implementation and future needs consistently to guide the evolution and adoption.

The outcome of the Act phase is an implemented solution or capability. To evaluate its success, determine whether the result mitigates the challenge and measure the success criteria you defined in the Understand phase.

Revisit the Strategy

Your strategy needs to be reviewed, refreshed, and recreated as priorities shift, new needs are uncovered, or new solutions are completed, in order to keep it relevant, aligned, and focused.

Reflect on how you have historically approached your geospatial projects. Many organizations live in the implement and operate steps: they build solutions, deploy them, and move on to the next project. While that may provide some value, following the full approach helps you find new ways to maximize your impact using the tools, data, technology, resources, and staff that are available to you right now.

In the Revisit phase, you update your geospatial strategy to account for changes in leadership priorities, business goals, and evolving technology. Esri strongly recommends reevaluating a geospatial strategy regularly, at least once a year. By adapting and updating your geospatial strategy, you can ensure your solutions continue delivering value to your organization

Four-Phase Approach in Context

The following sample case study illustrates the four-step approach to developing and executing a geospatial strategy. The story includes some common considerations, activities, and desired outcomes of each phase within the context of a local government example. While the narrative cannot cover every possible question that comes with developing a geospatial strategy, it will provide you with the baseline context and guidance you need to start building a strategy for your organization that is meaningful and sustainable.

As you read the case study, you will find suggestion boxes reminding you to think about your own organization and write down important information. These activities are meant to help you identify your organization's big-picture goals (those beyond GIS) and the challenges that prevent those goals from being met. Once you have that information, you can use the guide to determine holistic ways to mitigate those challenges, this is how you deliver recognized value to the organization.

A Case Study in Geospatial Strategy Development and Execution

Sky City has a population of 300,000 and covers 60 square miles. The City faces many familiar challenges: establishing sustainable growth, maintaining billions of dollars of infrastructure, attracting new businesses, etc. At the City, there is a GIS team of five including their GIS Manager. The department has a great reputation among the people who know their work, but engagement with departments has historically been around ad hoc requests, with limited connection to city executives. The team does great work, but operating in this fashion allows for misaligned work efforts and diminished value to the organization resulting in constrained resources.

Joan is the newly appointed GIS Manager of Sky City. She quickly identifies a pattern that many GIS Managers can relate to: people from various departments frequently request one-off apps or solutions from the GIS team or outside consultants. This has left the City with silos based on a variety of geospatial technologies, which prevents them from working together with vital and timely geographic information. Joan also knows that this tactical approach of delivering technology solutions, without understanding the bigger picture, can lead to a portfolio that is not delivering business benefits and that may be costing the City money. Joan knows her team must evolve to work more strategically, delivering capabilities and solutions that support multiple business goals that are aligned with their executive's challenges.

Lots of requests come from the Public Works Department, where there are several people who understand the value of GIS but don't have the skills or access to create solutions on their own. One day, Joan's team receives two separate requests from two different people—the Inspection Manager is looking for a mobile app, and the Operations Manager is looking for help supporting illegal dumping cleanups.

She knows there's greater potential to more effectively support City initiatives, and she knows that in order to grow GIS as an enterprise system she has to have a strategy. She and her team don't have the bandwidth to resolve requests in this way anymore. Since she's currently getting a lot of requests from Public Works, she decides to start the process of developing a City-wide geospatial strategy by focusing first on this single department.

Understanding the Business Challenges of the Sky City Public Works Department

Joan knows that for the geospatial strategy to be effective, she has to identify and secure the right sponsorship before getting started. **At a minimum, a champion, executive sponsor, and technical sponsor are required.** Filling these roles ensures that the effort will be focused on the right problem, that the solution will be appropriately resourced, and that the solution will be sustainable. Since Joan manages and evangelizes GIS at the City and sees the opportunity to help the City better meet its goals, she considers herself the champion of this effort. Joan knows she needs an executive sponsor to help her identify the business challenges within the department and to provide funding and resources to build the solution. Since Public Works has recently had several requests and is already an enthusiastic supporter of GIS, the Operations Manager could be her executive sponsor. In order to encourage

Identify Your Team

Look for people within your organization that can fill the three key roles. Since you're reading this guide, chances are that you're a champion.

his participation, Joan starts by helping the Operations Manager see the value in addressing all these ad-hoc requests in a strategic manner.

Joan knows she also needs a technical sponsor who will support and maintain new solutions. Joan has talented technical staff of her own, but she knows that beyond GIS technology she needs the Director of IT to support and validate any new capabilities and technology components they may require. Engaging with the technical sponsor early will help avoid surprises later. The technical sponsor should be a partner in understanding why change is needed and in determining what should change.

💡 **Tip: Keep the conversations business focused**

Reorient conversations that have become technology-centric by asking questions to understand the business processes and goals they're associated with

Joan works with her executive sponsor to better understand the business needs of Public Works. She meets with several leaders from different business units to create a shared understanding of the goals and desired outcomes the geospatial strategy should be built around. When they try to talk about specific apps they use or want, she reminds them that at this stage they're only looking to create a mutual agreement of the business goals. Together they document three key goals to align the strategy to: improve aging infrastructure, increase efficiency of maintenance crews, and improving communication of work status to the public.

Now they need to think about the measures the department will look to when monitoring the progress toward each goal. Since they don't need to know what the targets are themselves, Joan just thinks about what she would track on a chart for monitoring each goal's progress. For example, her team agrees that for their goal around increasing efficiency of maintenance crews, they will track the hours spent responding to complaints, the number of calls they get from the public, and how many requests they resolve.

She needs to have conversations about what is getting in the way of achieving those goals—their challenges. She keeps the conversation at a business level and avoids talking specifically about GIS. However, she does steer the conversation around business challenges that have a location component—challenges GIS is well-equipped to solve.

She knows that technology challenges she hears (e.g., “the data aren't accurate,” “the dashboard takes forever to load,” “we need to integrate with our EAM”) are valid and important to document, but they aren't what she is going to build her geospatial strategy around. When she hears technology challenges like these, she asks probing

Identify Goals and Success Measures

- *List two or three of your organization's priority goals.*
- *Don't worry about how GIS relates yet.*
- *Define success measures for each goal*

questions to better understand what aspects of the business they're affecting.

Document Challenges

- *List a few location-oriented challenges preventing your organization from achieving your documented goals*

While she does this, she avoids considering solutions before she understands the complete business challenge. For example, when she learns one challenge is receiving timely and accurate maintenance reports, she is tempted to solve this single challenge. However, when she resists doing this and seeks to fully understand the complete picture first, she

learns there are also challenges around monitoring the progress of maintenance jobs, identifying patterns of where complaints happen, and communicating information to the public about when their complaints are resolved.


Now that she and her sponsor have a shared understanding of what the Public Works geospatial strategy needs to address, they can move on to the Plan phase (see table 1). In the Plan phase, they will conceptualize how people in the Public Works department will work together using GIS to overcome these challenges.

Table 1 - Shared Understanding of Public Works Goals, Measures, and Challenges

Goal	Measure	Challenge
Improve aging infrastructure	# Assets # Problem Assets # Replaced Assets	Identifying patterns of where complaints happen
Increase efficiency of maintenance crews	Response Time # Calls # Resolved	Monitoring job progress
Improving communication of work status to the public	# Notices # Complaints	Communicating information to the public about when their complaints are resolved

Developing a plan for People, Process, and Technology at Public Works

In the Plan phase, Joan will ultimately develop a clear roadmap—a prioritized and sequenced list of activities—that will help Public Works overcome the challenges identified. Since the business challenges are tied to organizational goals, Joan and the executive sponsor are confident that the solutions developed will produce significant business benefits to Public Works. There is an even greater opportunity to maximize those benefits by implementing capabilities that can be used across multiple solutions. The Plan phase is designed to help facilitate that, by identifying cross-cutting capabilities that can be implemented to solve multiple problems. Joan is going to design solutions for each of the challenges discovered in the Understand phase. The solutions are comprised of one or more capabilities plus the skills needed to implement, maintain, and operate them. Solutions may share

 **Tip: Follow Best Practices**
Review the ArcGIS Best Practices document with your Esri account team to determine which BPs apply to your situation

capabilities, such as mapping, data management, and/or analysis. Joan wants to leverage capabilities that support business needs, follow [best practices](#), and are sustainable in order to maximize the likelihood that the solution will be effective. She starts with one of the department's priority challenges: *monitoring job progress to help improve the efficiency of field crews (see Table 1)*.

Joan identifies the capabilities required to address this challenge: mobile capabilities for field crews (e.g., to notify crews where to go and enable reporting) and decision support capabilities (e.g., a dashboard) that managers can use to quickly assess progress. Now she compares these requirements with what she already has (the current state). She needs to address the gaps either by enhancing existing capabilities and skills or by developing new ones altogether. Joan repeats this process for each business challenge identified in the Understand phase and looks for challenges with overlapping capabilities. This approach can help maximize value delivered relative to the time and cost needed to deliver a capability.

Joan knows it's not enough to only identify the software components and data that are needed—she also needs to consider the skills and experience required to design/implement, administer, and use each item to enable her team to deliver and sustain the required capabilities. She has a strong technical team, but she acknowledges that there are some skill gaps that she will need to address either with training and/or consulting services. For each of the technology components she identified, she documents whether skills or experience need to be augmented or supported in some way. For example, when considering the skills needed to deliver the capabilities associated with ArcGIS Enterprise, she thinks about the skills needed to create the technical architecture and deploy the software, the skills needed to keep ArcGIS Enterprise running and accessible (like applying software updates and managing user access), and any skills needed for the end-users (like managing data, performing analysis, or simply viewing a map). Then she makes a list of the skill areas where she may not have the appropriate resources and decides where training and/or consulting services would be valuable. Joan should contact her Esri training consultant for a workforce development plan to assist with this crucial step. The Understand phase was about *why* change is needed, and the steps of Plan so far have been about *what* is needed—the software, data, and skills needed to create one or more sustainable solutions. Now Joan needs to start defining *how* to implement the capabilities and solutions she's planned. She begins engaging with the implementation team to get clarification around deployment options (on-premises, cloud, or hybrid) and apply best practices.

Together they review the software list to see what [best practices](#) apply. Security, expectations for availability, workload separation, and other best practices are accounted for. Using the best practices and deployment considerations as a filter, they create a list of potential activities. These are the activities that need to be done to take the solutions from the concept stage (what has been documented so far) to production. Example types of activities include system design, infrastructure

provisioning, software implementation, information product configuration, and training. After creating a substantial list of activities, they note the prerequisites—the activities that must come first to enable other activities. For the remaining activities (such as configuring an app, integrating with a business system, or creating a new workflow), Joan uses a prioritization approach to determine which should come first. She evaluates each activity’s potential business benefit against how much risk or cost is associated with delivering it. This exercise helps her deliver value quickly, while working toward some of the activities that are high value but also high risk/cost.

Prioritize Activities

Review your list of activities and note any prerequisites. Use a prioritization approach for identifying which activities to aggressively embrace (delivers value quickly) and which to cautiously embrace (delivers value in the long term)

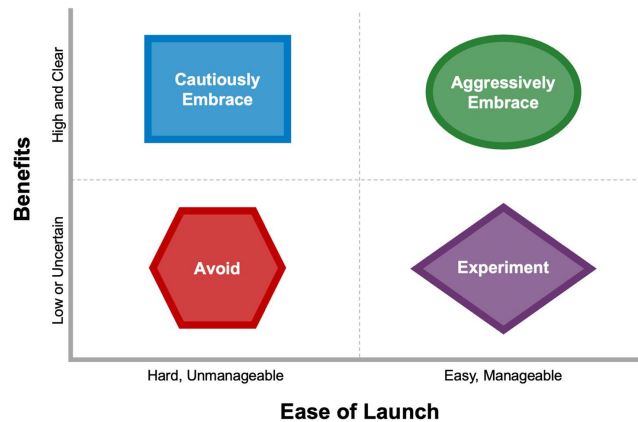


Figure 1 Prioritization Matrix

After deliberating with her executive sponsor to evaluate relative business benefit and her technical team to evaluate relative risk, level of effort, and prerequisites, she has the information she needs to create a prioritized and sequenced list of activities—the roadmap she will use in the Act phase. It’s likely that the first phase of her roadmap will focus on some prerequisite or foundational activities that will enable the business solutions she and her sponsor evaluated. Each phase should have specific activities, directly connected to positive outcomes, that lead to the identified future state from the Plan phase. This also means that it’s possible there will be multiple efforts running in parallel. Joan’s roadmap might look very different than her peers in a neighboring city, but that’s to be expected. Joan focuses on the approach, the business needs, and desired outcomes, not the design of the artifact itself.

Tip: Revisit Your Strategy Regularly

Think of circumstances or events that might influence your organization’s strategy over time. These might include elections, new management, mergers, reorganizations, special events, natural disasters, or other major proceedings.

Executing on the Plan

Now that Joan has a roadmap that she and the stakeholders (her sponsors and the implementation team) have agreed on, she is ready to execute the plan. The team acts on each of the activities in the defined sequence of the roadmap, ensuring that the stakeholders are prepared for the upcoming changes to their workflows when they're impacted which relies on a change management plan. Upon completion of each activity, the outcomes are reviewed and documented to ensure they meet expectations and business requirements. Successful results are then shared to make sure executive sponsors and key decision-makers know that you have executed on a solution tied to a goal and are helping to mitigate business challenges.

Revisiting the Public Works Geospatial Strategy

As Joan and her team execute on their strategy, they review it periodically to make sure it's updated as priorities shift, new needs are uncovered, or new solutions are built that impact workflows and needs. Joan regularly meets with her executive sponsor to account for changes in leadership priorities, business goals, and evolving technology capabilities. She will also make sure to review and update her strategy as elections, special events, public crises, or natural disasters happen.

Conclusion

Developing the Geospatial Strategy to Meet New Demand

When we first met Joan, she had just been appointed the GIS Manager of Sky City. She needed a way to focus her limited resources on the City's most pressing needs to deliver greater value to her stakeholders, so she decided to develop a geospatial strategy.

Working through the four phases with her stakeholders, Joan was able to deliver much more value to Public Works than previously, and on a much quicker timeline. In fact, once the Operations Manager saw this, he presented the time and cost savings his team has achieved as well as progress toward his yearly goals in a quarterly leadership meeting. Once other managers heard about the success Public Works had, interest began to grow within other departments. For example, the Director of Economic Development suggested the potential of using GIS to address urban blight (a mayoral initiative), which affects several other departments including the Mayor's Office, Public Health, and Parks. Now that enabling the success of Public Works has led to a broader, city-wide interest in GIS, Joan plans to revisit the entire geospatial strategy to incorporate the business needs of these additional departments.

Building Your Own Geospatial Strategy

A geospatial strategy will help you align your people, processes, and technology to your organization's business needs by taking a business-first approach, resulting in a higher return on your investment in geospatial technology. Developing and executing a geospatial strategy involves four distinct phases: Understand, Plan, Act, and Revisit.

In the Understand phase you work with your executive sponsors and other stakeholders to create a shared understanding of your organization's business goals, and what business challenges are getting in the way of achieving those goals. In the Plan phase, you begin to scope out a future state: what capabilities and skills will be needed to address the challenges you identified in Understand. Applying best practices, you create a prioritized list of activities (a roadmap) to evolve your organization from its current state to the future state you've identified. Act is where you launch a set of implementation cycles that deliver incremental value based on your roadmap. In the fourth phase, you revisit your geospatial strategy as priorities shift, new needs are uncovered, and as technology evolves. By using this approach to define your geospatial strategy, you will be able to clearly articulate the business value of GIS to key stakeholders and maximize the impact of your GIS investment.

Remember you should always ask for help. There are many resources available if you want to learn how a geospatial strategy can help your organization, need help reviewing an existing strategy, or want support developing a new one. You can work with your local community or collaborate online, attend an event and collaborate with your peers in person, or reach out to Esri account team and/or at GeospatialStrategy@esri.com. Get involved in the GeoNet community for Strategy and Planning and consider attending an Esri event and meet with an expert who can review your strategy with you.



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