

FPENTREPRENEUR

# GROWTH STRATEGIES

## How the rise of mobile and big data are a blessing for one GIS-based business

[Mary Teresa Bitti](#) | November 21, 2016



Handout/Esri Canada Alex Miller, founder of Esri Canada, says in part he is driven by what GIS can do to help make the world more sustainable by better managing the land, air, soil and vegetation.

Increasingly businesses, industries and governments are turning to Geographic Information Systems — the technology of the science of geography — to make better decisions about everything from target marketing to tracking the spread of disease to managing utility outages to property assessment. Put simply, geography is becoming a transformational and disruptive technology.

Alex Miller, president of Esri Canada, has long understood the power of geography in the digital world. Miller founded the company, which provides enterprise GIS solutions to 12,000 organizations across Canada and a wide swathe of industries in 1984. The company enjoyed compound annual growth of 15 per cent until 2009, its worst year ever. And even then it managed to grow albeit by 1.5 per cent. Thanks to the rise of mobile and big data, last year was a breakout year for **Esri Canada. “We were up 10 per cent last year and 13 per cent this year,” Miller affirmed.**

**“We are constantly looking to disrupt our existing products. Part of what drives me is what GIS can do to help make our world more sustainable by better managing our land, air, soil, vegetation.”**

In the early days, Miller focused on engineering and digital mapping, designing the digital mapping program for the Ontario Government’s Polaris project (“we’re now converting them to a new technology”); parcel editing software for Oxford County, before expanding to plus-one markets, including natural resources and utilities.

**Today, 60 per cent of Esri Canada’s business is from the public sector and 40 per cent from the private sector.**

**“We converted ourselves into a horizontal product,” Miller said. “We were pioneering this technology. That has its challenges but being part of a global organization [Esri] has the advantage of being able to call on a number of resources around the world yet we are still an independent Canadian business.”**

**Strategic partnerships have been critical to the company’s growth and sustainability, Miller said. “The nature of what we do, the digitization of any industry, has to evolve, people have to evolve, systems have to evolve,” he said.**

**“We’ve tackled it market by market and instead of trying to do everything by ourselves, we’ve recruited partners who deeply understand a given market. We teach the partner how our platform works. Those partners feed us requirements in addition to customers.”**

Environics Analytics is a close partner of Esri Canada and it is through that partnership that Esri Canada broke into the retail market. Environics provides market segmentation data, population forecasts and demographic analysis for Esri Canada to integrate into its platform.

**“When you buy our software today you have 1,700 variables by census dissemination area that you can use right inside our platform,” Miller said.**

One application Esri is focused on is Assessment Analyst. Its latest joint venture is a research project with the National Research Council and a Netherlands-based firm involved in high megapixel street front **cartography that can create incredibly detailed complete 3D models of streets.** “It’s tied to our Assessment Analyst application which eliminates the need to send property assessors into the field, increasing output and improving accuracy,” Miller noted.

The 3D models are so detailed they can pick peeling painting on the exterior of buildings. (Note: there is a 98% correlation between the exterior of buildings and the interiors, a key piece of information for assessors.) Esri Canada hopes to roll out Assessment Analyst across the U.S. soon.

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Another product being worked on is Collector, which lets users connect from their mobile devices to Esri Canada’s geo database. **A big chunk of Esri Canada’s growth has been the result of SaaS and putting its software on mobile devices.** A companion product — Operations Dashboard — allows everyone in the office to watch as data is collected. “It makes everything more efficient and effective,” Miller said.

“We’re helping organizations solve problems they didn’t know they had.”

One problem Esri Canada is trying to solve is responsibility for shared right of way by utilities and cities. “We put everything into a GIS and it will show where everything is and its age so they can co-ordinate public works to be most efficient,” Miller said.

“We’ve always been in cities’ planning departments, now we’re in their engineering departments taking abstracts from geography and turning them into models. Municipalities are realizing they can model a water network, for example, or electrical network and do load flow analysis with our GIS software. Geography is becoming a transformational and disruptive science and technology.”

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Going forward, Miller said, the Internet of things, Big Data and Real Data will be the next three big evolutions to guide growth at Esri Canada.

“GIS has become much more than crunching out maps with stuff on it,” said Brad Cherniak, partner in Toronto-based business advisory firm, Sapient Capital Partners.

“That aspect has been commoditized. Now it’s about creating insights but not just from geographic data. As sensor technology improves, everything is generating data. The question is **what do you do with it?**”

Esri Canada thinks it has the answer in its recently released analytical and visualization framework, Insights for GIS. “If a picture’s worth a thousand words, a map is worth a thousand pictures,” Miller noted.

“People can make maps, send them to each other, share them, analyze them, combine them, make mashups, and gain new insights in those mashups. That’s where we think our growth will come.”