Transcript of interview with David Overton, Ordnance Survey

Speaker Key

JO   John
DA   David Overton

IV   Well, I've got David Overton from Ordnance Survey with me, and we're going to talk a little bit about managing innovation in ordnance survey. Now David, I wonder if you could start by just giving us a thumb nail sketch of what ordnance survey is; what it does; the role it plays in the UK.

DA   Okay. Well, we're the national mapping agency for Great Britain. We maintain a baseline digital map of Great Britain which constitutes 500 million objects which are maintained by our business and an army of our surveyors and quite a large group of people internally here as well. So the number of people we've got working here at Ordnance Survey is in the order of 1300 people. We've got a turnover of about 115 million pounds a year; we're a trading fund which means that we are a part of government, but we have to be self supporting. So in other words, we don't get any tax money or anything like that but we do have to earn the money on the sale of our data which has got some interesting impacts: having a foot in the civil service and a foot in the commercial sector as well; brings about sort of some of its own tensions. So within ordnance survey, my role is as Transit Manager within the new, newly developed Propositions Team. And that's really a team that's been around for just a couple of months, recognising that the old linear model of build and create in house; ignore the outdoor aspects and you know, whoever else might be outside of the business and might want the products and create something that's technically purer than putting it out there and expect everyone to come and buy, it is actually much more accepting that you start the cycle with foresight and insight as to what the market it; where trends are taking us, before actually proposing pilots which we build together with customers. So our model very much now, in the Product Directorate, within which I sit, is much less product focussed; is much more customer focussed, starting with foresight and insight, moving through into building, developing and then delivering through various different media which are always fragmenting.

IV   [Chuckle]   And it must be, obviously it's a very old organisation, it came out in the 18th century I think so it goes back a fair way.

DA   Yes.

IV   But it must be these days facing some very big challenges which require a different approach; thinking of Google Earth and things like that. It's, it's a much more complicated game and a linear model just wouldn't play in that.

DA   Absolutely John. I mean well from 1791, until probably 1991, we could pretty much exist as a publishing house. So we collect the data; we establish where it is; we print it in the traditional way; we print it off onto a map, and there it is, published just like a book. And you would send it out in manageable sized chunks that people can handle. And that would be the end of it. You would licence that information and, and that would be the end of it. A linear publishing model. Well, nowadays that really isn't possible at all and I think that other people within the business have realised that sometime ago so the business has been reshaping itself first of all in the technical side because that's where we're more comfortable; the technical business that really understands geography and pushes the boundaries of geography, before actually catching up with itself on the business side. But there are a number of innovations that we have now which traverse both sides.

JO   Mm.

DA   So one of them is, in recognition of Google as you, as you mentioned, a piece of work that I worked together with our previous New Technology Officer which passes this on, which was called Openspace; within that, we've basically got, there's basically an application programming interface without our raster or pictorial information, within it so for that think about the paper mounts that you might use for your outward bound walks and stuff, that's the electronic version of that so you can see it on a computer screen, but you're able to make your application, your favourite walking routes, mountain biking routes etc., or what the weather's going to be tomorrow at a very specific area of the country against our maps free of charge for non commercial purposes.

JO   Mm.

DA   So that's really our, one of our first steps towards embracing this new era where much more of what we see in the market is self authored or is tailored to a more specific niche requirement. So yes, in fact, we're having to change; we're having to produce services; on demand services; provide data on demand for the customer so rather than waiting for us to send out information on disc, we'll be updating it as and when it's needed; real time positioning services etc., so the technology has moved on and we can keep up with the technology.

JO   Yes.

DA   The business side of it is, is the bit where the challenge really is: moving from a linear publishing model to a model which embraces this free flow of information around the web.

JO   And that seems to make sense in the 21st century, and it kind of resonates with this, some of the big themes like open innovation, and user involved, user led innovation. You have describe a process now which has moved from linear push to much more collaborative foresight and then development. Could you give an example of how that process actually plays out in practice.

DA   Well, it's very early days for the particular, for the team here. I don't know how much I can talk about in terms of specific places because there's, there's the commercial sensitivity about it. It's sufficient to say that with the data that we make available more readily to our developer community and through Openspace and various other routes, many more people can start to develop upon our data.

JO   Mm.

DA   We can, if you like, talent spot that data. We can make available the applications that are made on that and because we're part of a large network, we can actually now more readily introduce people to each other.

JO   Mm.

DA   So one, one way that we're doing that is with the upcoming terra future event in February, where we're going to be connecting people around grand challenges; so there's a, so government is, is very much following the challenge based agendas; so challenges around sustainability, and around the environment and around transport, for example. And through collaborations like the Ideas in Transit Project, where we're working together with small partners and user innovators, we're actually learning an awful lot about communities that come together in mass collaboration to address these grand challenges. And my particular, given my job title …

JO   Yes.

DA   … my particular interest is in that around transport.

JO   And so I guess one of the things that might characterise the organisation, is, it's moved from being rather inward looking to essentially outward looking, identifying a wide range of different kinds of partners; different players and becoming much more a network manager.

DA   Mm.

JO   And that seems to play very much to this open innovation story where it's, it's about connections and knowledge flows rather than the traditional, we'll create knowledge, and deploy it.

DA   Yes, it's very much about that; that's the way that the business is heading, and of course that's, it's not without resistance.

JO   Mm.

DA   That, it's, it's quite and I think that this is where we see the tension between public remit and the commercial remit at the same time; there are hurdles that one needs to jump over; there's a lot of bureaucracy associated with being in the civil service, which is necessary bureaucracy, because everything needs to be fair and equitable and visible, that doesn't necessarily sit easily with, with cutting deals and making the best deals for your stakeholder community. So, it's, it's a difficult, it's a difficult way to go. But it is the structure that we have now, allows us the freedoms to actually build our ideas around propositioning areas.

JO   Mm.

DA   So rather than building on products, a product push, or a technology push, having the customer say right up front as someone with genuine needs and pain our focus is totally on that pain and how we alleviate that for the customer, I think we're in much better shape. But I think to say that we're, we're actually there, is, I think you, you …

JO   [Laugh]

DA   That's just not the way it is. I think to the outside, to the outside community, it would seem that ordnance survey is in a very strong position in the market, and sometimes that plays against our reputation.

JO   Mm. I don't think you're alone. I think a lot of organisations are having to reinvent themselves to deal with this open innovation challenge. I guess that one interesting question that's raised though is that traditionally, product development starts with an idea; it's scaled up and it's possible as you commit more resources, to stage the risk; you can have a kind of stage gate, some kind of project management system which converts the uncertainty to risk allows you to manage because you're in control of everything.

DA   Mm.

JO   How do you manage product development when it's much more interactive and where you've got many more players.

DA   Yes, I mean that's, that's something that in a small way we've got around with our, our Dragon's Den type approach.

JO   Mm.

DA   Which gave birth to Openspace and our outdoor exploration channel. So with that, what we recognised was there are an awful lot of innovative ideas that were getting trying to find their way through the governance that I've described earlier on, and just

hitting the corporate immune system and being rejected. Now those ideas were all very good in their own right, but there would always be a reason why they couldn't get through.

JO   Mm.

DA   Whether they, you know, in many senses you got the impression that they just weren't invented here. Sometimes, as with the case with Openspace, there were people who were … literally said that we, we were, we were exaggerating the case and that Google really isn't posing a threat to the business that we're currently, or would in future be involved with. And so there is this, there is this entrenched belief that sticking with the status quo has always been good for us in the past so why shouldn't it be good for us in the future. And those things are tough to get around. Even when you take your ideas right to the top of the business, there's always something that's, that's far more pressing, and in the civil service that could be political things more often than it is commercial things and those don't help good ideas get the airing that they need. So in recognition of this, our Director General asked our Director of HR and myself to build a process that would actually help top get innovative ideas through the business and thus came up with the Dragon's Den idea and that enabled us, for just a one hour period to get our Sales Market Development Officer together with our Chief Technology Officer together with our Director for Data Collection, which is the biggest part of our business and our Head of Products all in the same room at the same time, to actually listen to what these good ideas were, and it was backed up by you know, people who would have ideas; would come to me or a colleague of mine, who would act as business angels, who would shape the idea round to what we would call a proposition, following good practice that we borrowed from Kinetic in terms of benefits, needs approaching competition.

JO   Yes.

DA   We'd make sure that there was some, some very tough questioning around those areas, and those guys could create, we would send the presenters in there, with a very strong elevator set of statements that they could make around the project ideas. There was a big kill rate on ideas that came in, and ultimately two ideas from that batch of ideas that we actually took through the Dragon's Den, succeeded and went through to become …

JO   Mm.

DA   … Openspace, and to become the outdoor exploration portal as well. So, it's, it's a question of scaling that, not necessarily that approach but certainly that, that idea.

JO   Yes.

DA   How do you get that done or how do you get to a position where you don't actually need those directors, to get the most important people of the business to make the decisions on everything, seems a bit extreme.

JO   Yes.

DA   So how do you make sure that there's a kind of culture within an organisation where that kind of decision making can be taken further down in the organisational chain.

JO   Mm.

DA   So that we can actually nurture a lot of things through the piloting phase etc., and work out together with the customer whether it's worth progressing.

JO   Yes.

DA   Rather than the rather more enclosed Dragon's Den, where you're basically working out what works for the directors; it's still pretty closed and it's, even though it still came out with two open innovation type ideas, it was still pretty much closed, the decision making process. There's a lot of challenges around that.

JO   Mm. And just to, in conclusion, a couple of broader questions. You've been involved in managing innovation in the organisation for some time. Looking out, where do you see the challenges. You've already highlighted some of the difficulties of working in a very new environment, and developing new ways of doing it but where do you see some of the challenges coming.

DA   Well, the challenges are not, the temptation in this place is to leap to the technical challenges but nowadays those technical challenges come bound up with their own business challenges. And so it might sound quite boring but standards could be an area where innovation is needed and where in actual fact, innovation needs standards. So, for example our own business, the area that we operate within is going to be very strongly affected by new legislations which is coming from Europe which is known as Inspire, which is about creating a spatial data infrastructure for Europe or in other words, a common set of standards that geospatial data should conform to in order to allow policy to be made on the same set of frameworks regardless of which country that you're in. So you can see the good sense in that. Everything is evidence based policy these days so that you can see that there's good sense there. Now that needs, that needs a good set of standards around data, around the services: how would you serve that through a distributing network. And in our case, that means right, so our data is now going to have to run through a distributive network. The publishing model is very difficult to establish, to exist in that environment, publishing model requires us to have a one to one relationship with the end recipient, almost a hand holding or a hand shaking relationship rather than with the exchange of a piece of paper which says you have the permission to do this.

JO   Yes.

DA   It requires an infrastructure that allows the data to have certain rights to certain users on the internet. But to allow the free flow of that information for the people who need the information as and when it's required. So a great context for that would be in disaster management or risk management, where one could imagine that you're looking at multiple risks associated with, for example, a flood in Great Britain, easy to envisage.

JO   Yes. [Laughter]

DA   We now have floods; the chances of floods are increased by the land use change in an area. People build over their front gardens; they concrete over their driveways, etc., they build extensions, conservatories etc., and that has an impact on the run off characteristics. Those run off characteristics might increase the chances of flood, those floods will affect the transport networks from place to place. And we'll have knock on effects for the fertility of soil, pollution run offs etc., etc. So you could imagine a whole stack of different risk management tools coming together in the area. Perhaps our responsibility from an ordnance survey perspective is serving those, serving the maps or serving the features to the people running those models, but someone actually is going to be asking the question, somewhere in the net, the policy guy, or their risk manager, is going to be asking the question, what's going to be the impact, what's the, that's what's the financial impact or what's the human impact or what's the quality of life impact on this particular set of occurrences and they won't just be asking for a map or data, or features. They'll be asking for flood models; they'll be asking for drainage models and pollution models, all of that to come together through the web. And so I think people keeping a track and being able to get the right recompense for their date through a much more distributed system, is going to be a big challenge.

JO   Mm.

DA   In the future. And then multiply that up by the number of different channels and people are going to be using hand held or on line, or main frame or base [?] or looking further forward, the chips inside their heads. [Chuckle] It's basically, it's going to be a big challenge to move from that permissive licensed type rule that we have at the moment to one where the rights to data follow it through a hugely distributed system.

JO   Mm. Yes, that's a pretty big challenge. I can begin to imagine. I guess a last question, and perhaps some personal reflection: again, thinking that you've been involved in managing innovation what lessons have you learned; if you were sort of passing on your accumulated wisdom about how to, in a large organisation, in this case a public sector organisation, how to manage innovation effectively. Any lessons, any recipes.

DA   Yes. Never make it your own idea. [Laughter] It's, I, I've suffered from it because I like to generate ideas. What I have learned is that the best ideas, if you measure the best ideas as those that become innovations, and then become, you know, move through proposition and then go out into the market, the best ones will be generated by those who'll be the decision makers further down the line in collaboration with each other. And so, one of the approaches I've adopted here is very much a workshop type

approach, and that of getting all the people, knowing where you want people to go; but taking them all two steps further back than you actually feel comfortable with.

JO   Mm.

DA   So, rather than starting from: I've got a great idea about taking Google on, by producing our own API's for example; it's a case of taking a step back of what's happening in our market.

JO   Mm.

DA   I've, I've got a range of techniques and typically they start off with wish statements; if you go to those stakeholders within the group that you're trying to work with around innovation, really to influence them properly you need to get them to embed it back in what's personal to them. What are the risks that they see the business is exposed to. And then you can tease out from that what is the obvious next stage; so working collaboratively together, internally but also working collaboratively externally as well. So I'm feeling there's a great deal of satisfaction I get from our external collaborations now. External collaborations aren't necessarily a new thing to us; we're just treating them, you know, in a new way, as a much more important part of a balanced portfolio that lets us look at the radical innovations as well as the incremental process ones. And maybe as my big challenges go, the ones I was alluding to, stuff that might be right up in that transformational bit where our business model needs to change, as well. Now, with those ones you have to [chuckle] you have to regress people.

JO   That's great. Thank you ever so much David. To make a very corny pun, I think you've given us an excellent map of innovation management in this particular area. Thanks ever so much for you time.