

Session Abstracts

Stuck in the Middle: Navigating the Mid-Career GIS Identity Crisis

Presented by Christina Brunsvold, CAL FIRE

Description: Mid-career GIS professionals often occupy a “missing middle”. No longer entry-level, yet not fully established in leadership. Early-career tools & senior-level guidance is abundant, those in the middle frequently face uncertainty about their next steps, career direction, and professional identity. Explore the “missing middle” in GIS careers, focusing on the critical decision points between technical specialization & management pathways. Gain insight into the challenges of transitioning roles, identifying growth opportunities, & building support networks in a stage where guidance is often limited. Through relatable experiences, this session will highlight strategies for navigating career ambiguity, finding mentorship & community, & recognizing the value mid-career professionals bring to their organizations. Whether you’re considering a move into leadership or deepening your technical expertise, this talk will provide actionable steps to help you move forward with clarity and confidence.

Keywords: *mid-career, career growth, professional development*

Beyond the Map: Career Paths GIS Doesn’t Talk About

Presented by Johnny Harley, TREKK Design Group and Brianna Zumhof, Eagleview

Description: Most GIS professionals start their careers building maps, managing data, and learning technical tools, but many don’t realize how many doors GIS can open beyond traditional analyst roles. This session explores real-world career paths that branch out from GIS, including project management, business development, product strategy, operations, and leadership roles.

Rather than focusing on technical skills, this talk highlights how communication, curiosity, and relationship-building can transform a GIS career. Through relatable examples and practical advice, attendees will learn how to identify opportunities, expand their skillsets, and position themselves for roles they may not have originally considered.

Keywords: *Career, leadership, relationships*

Mapping the Transition from Student to Geospatial Professional

Presented by Allison Bednar, Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council

Description: The transition from student to Geospatial professional is not often taught in the college classroom. There is a large difference between submitting a map for a grade and delivering geospatial outputs to inform real-world decisions. Oftentimes, emerging geospatial professionals feel overwhelmed or experience “imposter syndrome” because academic assignments come with clear objectives and defined steps while tackling a professional project can be ambiguous. GIS is more than just making maps, and success in the field depends not just on technical ability, but also how GIS can be a tool for decision making and storytelling. As a rapidly evolving field, GIS requires continuous learning and adaptability, which can make it difficult for early career professionals to find their niche. This presentation maps my transition from student to professional, highlighting lessons learned, common challenges, and strategies for navigating the first year in the profession.

Keywords: *emerging geospatial professionals, continued learning, adaptability*