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ATG Interviews Richard L. Landry, Director, Data Innovation at SAGE Publishing

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Director, Data Innovation at SAGE Publishing

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

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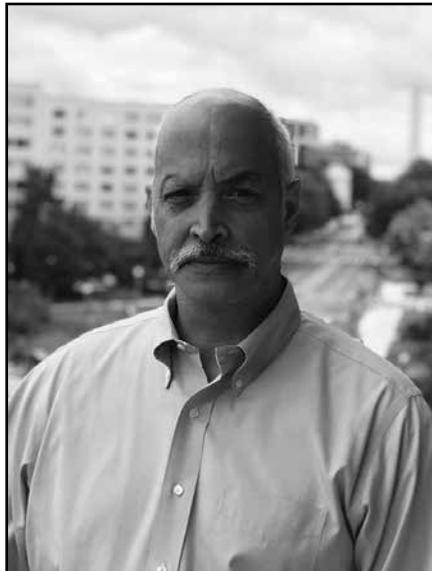**ATG: Richard, can you tell us about yourself? Your background?**

RL: Born in Chicago. Raised in Michigan. My father was a civil engineer, but today, he would probably be considered a computer engineer. He applied computer programming to civil engineering problems. He used to bring home the "green" in white striped paper and roll it down the hallway and it would say things like, "Happy Birthday **Richard**." I thought it was the greatest. I had two of the first personal computers, first a ZX-80, then I moved up to the Radio Shack TRS-80 with 16 MB Ram and TWO floppy drives. I studied Electrical Engineering at **Valparaiso University** and after graduation, moved to Washington D.C. to start my career with a small consulting company.

ATG: We know that you recently joined SAGE Publishing, but we were wondering what inspired you to start your original company Conquest Systems? Were you the sole owner? How many people worked for the company? When did it start?

RL: I really thought that government contractors were not set up to attract and retain great software developers. I thought my real talent was identifying and retaining great software developers. For government contractors, they were typically concerned with keeping their indirect cost as low as possible, which meant little training, no opportunities to learn new software, and very little internal infrastructure to support career growth as a software developer. I thought I could do things differently, by hiring very experienced, well-educated developers, and building in the training and infrastructure for career growth into our pricing. Our pitch was that our developers were better trained, had more experience, and more support, and even though our hourly rate was higher, we could do the job faster, better and cheaper. I started out in the early 1990s as a single consultant and as customers allowed, started to bring on other software developers. For the most part we were right, we grew very rapidly, but we always had trouble scaling the business development. In government contracting, I didn't understand the salespeople…and they didn't understand me.

ATG: Where did you get the idea for your flagship product, Data Planet? Can you tell us how it moved from concept to becoming a viable product? When did Data Planet first appear on the market?

RL: The original **Data Planet** interface was developed as a business intelligence tool. We were competing with the Cognos and Microstrategys of the world. It was a long sales cycle against big competition, but we had a good pitch. We could rapidly ingest data and allow users at the executive management level to ask and answer their own questions about performance in the enterprise. We allowed them to pull data from many different systems and identify relationships (very much the same as we do today). We were selling mostly to financial institutions. They started asking questions like "What happens to my internal metrics when the Libor rate goes up or down?" So we created a product that we hosted that would ingest third party data that our users could securely combine with their internal data. For us, it was an easier sale and there was no one else doing it. It continued to grow until **LexisNexis** saw it and started to resell it.

ATG: Explain background and history please.

At the time, **LexisNexis** had a statistical product Statistical Insight. They saw **Data Planet** as a good complement as Statistical Insight was a very high level product and **Data Planet** could give much more detailed data. For example, if you wanted to know how many males lived in Indiana, Statistical Insight could tell you that. But if you wanted to know how many African American males between the ages of 20 and 24 lived in your zip code, you could find that in Data Planet.

ATG: Tell us about the Data Planet repository please.

The **Data Planet** repository was built to quickly ingest and organize data. We were very deliberate about separating the repository from the **Data Planet** front end and wanted no dependencies. We have built a suite of tools to be able to push data to other tools and products. The **Data Planet** interface just happens to be the main one. When looking at **SAGE**

pre-acquisition, one of the things that was very attractive was the opportunity to integrate data into other established products.

ATG: What was the main reason for selling Data Planet to SAGE? What did they offer that other suitors were unable to provide? What was the date that Data Planet officially became a SAGE product?

RL: I knew about **SAGE Publishing**. They had a great reputation for their content. When we started to talk more seriously, I found that I liked the culture of **SAGE**. From my somewhat limited view, the employee-facing policies and the benefits were very employee friendly. I understand the metrics that go into decisions like creating a benefits package and it comes down to how you allocate your resources. The fact that their policies were so employee friendly gives a strong indication of their priorities, and I felt it matched up well with my own. I have often said, the best way to take great care of your customers is to take great care of your employees. On January 8 of 2018, we were acquired by **SAGE** and my early observations turned out to be true. That is who **SAGE** is.

ATG: Now that you have sold Data Planet to SAGE, what is happening with your company Conquest Systems? What is its future?

RL: Conquest Systems is dormant. After a few years, we will shut it down completely.

ATG: We understand that your new title is "Director, Data Innovation" at SAGE Publishing. What are your responsibilities? How many people will be part of your staff at SAGE? How will you fit into the SAGE organization? Who will you report to?

RL: For now, my responsibilities are very similar to my pre-acquisition responsibilities. Make sure there is a smooth transition and keep growing the product. As we start to normalize, we will continue to grow and build other data products and support the integration of data into other **SAGE** products. Currently, my staff is the **Data Planet** team that transitioned, but we have been able to offload a lot of the administrative work and focus more on the technology. I am a member of the Library Editorial team which focuses on library content and I report to **Todd Baldwin**, Associate Vice President of Library Editorial at **SAGE**.

ATG: This seems like a unique, new departure/product for SAGE. What will the new Data Planet be called? Will it be independent or part of another SAGE product? Or will it complement existing SAGE products?

RL: It really is not a departure; it is an expansion. **SAGE** is already in this space with **SAGE** Stats, which houses a collection of current and historical data series on popular

topics of research interest. We never really considered **SAGE** Stats a competitor and see the tools as very complementary. We saw **SAGE** Stats as a tool that was very easy to use and focused at data for the undergraduate. We considered them more of a competitor to Statista, but with more capability. By contrast, **Data Planet** offers the ability to drill down to a very detailed level and can be used as a research tool by comparing data from different sources and calculating new data fields based on figures from other databases. **Data Planet** is a trusted resource with a strong brand and we want to keep that brand.

ATG: From the customer's standpoint, what will make these new SAGE data offerings unique in today's marketplace? Should customers look for any new products on the horizon? Is there anything new and innovative on the drawing board?

RL: Being part of a larger company with more resources allows us to do some of the things that we could not do as a smaller company. We will continue to grow the **Data Planet** repository as we have, but now as part of **SAGE**, we are getting more traction with data publishers who would not speak to us as

a smaller company. To our customers, this acquisition will mean more data, and more valuable data, that we have not had access to in the past. **SAGE** has many well-established, well-respected products, and I think there is a great opportunity to seamlessly integrate data into these products and provide greater value to the researcher.

ATG: We assume that research libraries are your main clients, but we understand that there are other trade and commercial organizations that make use of your products. Can you tell us more about your customer base and how you plan to market the products? How will SAGE change their marketing strategy, if at all?

RL: We have sold to commercial and government customers and will continue to do so, but our focus will continue to be the support of academic libraries and information literacy.

ATG: You along with several other staff members from Conquest Systems joined SAGE to support the development and transition of the product. Often the melding of staffs can pose difficulties. What differences in corporate cultures did you have to overcome to make the transition work smoothly?

RL: I find that the corporate priorities are very similar, which has made the transition

fairly smooth. The one issue I have experienced moving from a small company to a large company is that when you see a problem, it is not as easy as just going to fix it. The good news is now, when I see a problem, I can get a whole group of people together to fix it.

ATG: Is there a question you wish we had asked that we didn't?

RL: I wish you would have asked about my golf game…. It's getting better. I was a TERRIBLE. Now I'm a TERRIBLE+. (All kidding aside, I think you've asked all the right questions).

ATG: Richard, this transition must be both exciting and exhausting. What do you do in your down time to stay fresh and ready for the next challenge?

RL: I have started riding my bicycle to work. It is about a 12-mile ride in the morning. I ride my bike downhill about a mile to the river and ride into Georgetown along the towpath. It is a great way to start the day. When I get into Washington Harbor, I sit and enjoy the water for a few minutes, then I go into the gym, shower and get to my desk. When I get in, I am in a great mood. I'm relaxed and ready for the day. The bad news is that in the evening, the ride is a mile uphill….still getting used to that one. 🌳

ATG Interviews Beth Marhanka

Interim Associate University Librarian for User Services & Engagement and Head, Gelardin New Media Center/Maker Hub, Georgetown University

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

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ATG: Beth, according to your LinkedIn profile you direct both new media literacy programs and emerging technology initiatives for Georgetown University. Can you give us some examples of the new programs and initiatives that you and your team have worked on?

BM: Over the last few years the emerging technologies that we have been focusing on have been our makerspace, which we call the Maker Hub, and exposing our community to virtual reality and 360 video. This year we also plan to offer instruction for creating augmented reality.

Other initiatives we spearheaded a few years ago that are still incredibly popular and in high demand are data visualization and podcasting. We're continually taking the pulse of our community to figure out what resources or services will improve teaching and learning and provide the best return on investment.

ATG: In looking at the Georgetown University Library website it appears that the Gelardin New Media Center and the Maker Hub are separate entities. Is that correct? Can you clarify?

BM: Yes, that's right. In the New Media Center we make it possible for anyone at **Georgetown**, whether faculty, student or staff

and regardless of their department, level of experience or ability, to communicate ideas more effectively through digital media. When we got our first 3D printer and started getting requests for other types of equipment for physical making, like sewing machines and fabrication tools, it became clear that creativity and innovation extend beyond the digital realm to physical making too.

A very practical reason we separated the Maker Hub from the New Media Center is the amount of noise generated by the equipment in the Maker Hub. Digital media production requires quiet spaces and makerspaces are pretty noisy. The Maker Hub is also a separate entity because it is a great philanthropic opportunity for a donor interested in innovation and entrepreneurship.

ATG: What specific services does each provide? In what ways do they complement each other?

BM: The New Media Center provides access to digital media equipment, software, and hardware, and we offer instruction and