

Abmed Abukhater is the global industry manager for community development (urban and regional planning and economic development) at ESRI, the geographic information systems firm based in Redlands, California. Abukhater is a Palestinian, a native of the Gaza Strip city of Rafah. He was educated as an architectural engineer at the University of Gaza, received a master's degree in urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois (where he was a Clinton Scholar and worked as a planner for the

city of Champaign), and earned a PhD in community and regional planning at the University of Texas (with a dissertation on water rights). At UT-Austin, he managed the university's first campuswide geographic information system for Wi-Fi access (while adding more titles to his world powerlifting records). He started at ESRI about a year ago.

Planning's executive editor, Ruth Knack, AICP, interviewed Abukhater at APA's national planning conference in New Orleans, where ESRI was an exhibitor.

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ERIC LAYCOCK/ESRI

Q What does a global industry manager for community development do?

A In a way, that means I'm ESRI's "big thinker" on topics like planning and economic development. I was hired as a domain expert to address issues related to smart growth planning, sustainable development, and economic revitalization. I work to help planners communicate in new ways, to leverage GIS to provide collaborative decision-making platforms, and to create a societal infrastructure for human interaction.

Q What are you working on now?

A Two big areas are GeoDesign and Economic Gardening. GeoDesign, which was the brainchild of Jack Dangermond, is a way of systematically integrating GIS technology into the design and planning process to generate maps and disseminate data. My role is to put it into practical terms, to help planners to accomplish their jobs more efficiently and effectively. Economic Gardening is a term coined by Chris Gibbons of Littleton, Colorado, to describe a new way of creating a climate that will help local businesses grow and prosper.

But the big thing for me is Planning 2.0, which integrates online GIS mapping and planning tools to engage the public in decision making. 2.0 is an elastic term used to describe any cutting-edge web feature; it can also be applied to social media like Facebook and Twitter. Our idea is to empower citizens and ensure more open and accountable government. Planning 2.0 is a way to engage diverse communities who might be reluctant to go to city hall meetings. Instead, we can put the meetings online. Instead of

parachuting planning consultants into a community and expecting them to come up with a solution to a specific problem—with little knowledge about the history of the place or the local planning culture—we can learn from the real experts, the people who live there.

Q How did Planning 2.0 start?

A It came from a realization that GIS tools could be used for more than mapping. These tools are very powerful. Each click brings more data—about elevation and altitude, for instance, but about planning issues, too. We thought you could do more with this data, and with the sophisticated analytical and modeling tools, especially when you can bring the public into the process through social media.

Q To what extent is what you do marketing?

A I represent the firm in fields like plan-

ning—by writing articles and speaking at conferences. So I'm involved with domestic marketing strategies. But it's important to note that marketing is not selling. We market ideas, not products. We try to shine a light on specific issues that are important to the broader planning community. We identify common problems and come up with practical solutions.

ESRI brought me in to marry GIS technology with solutions to planning problems. They wanted someone who relates to the planning community and can speak the planning language. I work in many worlds: environmental planning, economic development, and land-use policy. I also must keep up with trends in smart growth—how can we make it smarter by using GeoDesign? What are the best practices in applying and integrating geographic intelligence into how we think and behave? The job requires a multisource point of view about the forces that affect urban settlement.

Our audience is generally government at all levels. We're looking for ways to help planners and others do their jobs better—to give them more operational muscle. We give them tools that they can use to monitor the impacts of their plans, particularly the impacts on social equity and economic growth, and the environment.

The results so far are good: Planners are using all sorts of Web 2.0 technologies—including the emerging Planning 2.0 environment—to create effective support system (PSS) platforms, and to foster bidirectional citizen participation. But much more work is needed to fully institutionalize these ideas.