

What does it take to be a facilities manager?

Contributed by Peter Forshaw, 2007

Peter Forshaw grapples with some basic questions about the industry, enquiring into the changes that have taken place and what the facilities manager requires in 2007 and beyond.

What qualifications are expected of facilities managers these days?

How is technology influencing the evolution of the FM role?

A few years ago, I wrote an analysis of the FM sector as a whole and at that stage my feelings were that the market was still clearly separated into two distinct areas: in-house (corporate management) and outsourced (third party). In my view, in mid-2007 the FM market is much more blurred in certain respects and, as such, success requires an ever increasingly diverse range of skills, education and attributes.

This blurring of boundaries can be partly attributed to the fact that directly employed corporate FM roles within departments have been increasingly marginalised. These have been replaced by the outsourced third parties who have been continuously forced to improve their services and speed of delivery to the market (due to increase in competition and client demands); they have become sophisticated in most cases, and costs have been reduced and services improved. More importantly, the internal and external customers are often none the wiser on whether the individual in the post room actually works for a construction company, a specialist provider or even an IT firm.

Changing expectations

When I first started recruiting facilities professionals eight years ago, apart from technical roles, education was very much secondary to cultural fit, personality and skill set. This was driven by the market, characterised by a lack of availability and a lack of take-up of FM degrees or qualifications. Times have since changed. With the introduction of much more sophisticated recruitment methods and higher standards in selection, many firms recruiting mid-management level and above in the FM industry are now expecting to see a sound grounding at least to HND/GCSE level but preferably A Level standard, balanced with some additional further studies which are expected to either be in FM or business/financial management.

Financial management and/or business management skills are often preferred in mid-senior management because of the ongoing focus on cost reduction in business in general but particularly in the FM sector. Facilities managers are not only increasingly expected to manage larger and larger budgets, but are also asked to continuously drive costs out of these budgets by several per cent per annum.

Partly due to legislation and an increasingly risk-averse client population, a good appreciation of health and safety, balanced with a qualification, is paramount to all practicing facilities managers at supervisor level and above.

Technology has played a key part over the last 10 years, too - and will continue to do so over the next 10. It is vital that all within the sector embrace this trend, as if you don't you will certainly be left behind. Many graduates that I have met recently looking for their first move in the sector look at whether they can work from home in the same way that many looked at a company car 10 years ago.

In this ever-changing world it is now not only suggested but expected that you undertake further studies with respect of both professional qualifications and advances in technology.

There have been many instances that I am aware of where candidates have either not been selected for interview or have not been successful in securing a role after the interview process due to the lack of a specific qualification. Indeed, over three-quarters of client organisations and service providers in the facilities industry have had problems filling a specific vacancy in 2006/07 - and nearly all those questioned alluded to reasons that included a lack of required experience or a lack of a required technical proficiency.

Recruitment strategies

Many client organisations and service providers in the industry have found it increasingly difficult to recruit the right candidates (those with the required range of skills, professional memberships and relevant qualifications) for their business needs in this difficult labour market. Many argue that demand for candidates continues to outstrip supply. However, for every facilities manager role I have ever advertised I have always had a vast response. Personally, I feel that on a high percentage of occasions firms struggle to fill their vacancies successfully as a result of not finding candidates with the client relationship skills or that fit with the culture of the business - which is an argument for the use of professional recruitment consultancies.

That said, improving skills in the industry will be increasingly important going forward. In the short-term, clients are using inventive methods to attract the best.

Some organisations in the industry are absorbing the advances in technology and using it to their advantage to stay ahead of the competition by creating flexible working environments. Living 200 miles away from head office is no longer a problem in some scenarios, particularly if you are involved with HR, finance, business development or consultancy. Those companies that retain fixed ideas about all employees being based out of the same office 9am-5pm Monday to Friday often struggle to attract the best, and will continue to do so.

I recruited a person for a client last year after they had struggled to find a business development professional in London. I found someone who lives in the north of England but who is happy to stay away from home when required for meetings and presentations. Whether the rest of the time is spent on the road or at home is surely irrelevant if tasks are completed and the phone is switched on.

Many clients have spent huge sums over the last few years on marketing campaigns (both Internet and journal-specific) and on robust HR processes to help define themselves as an employer of choice, adding increased structure and improving the standard of their recruitment - thus further increasing competition for the specialist individuals already in short supply.

Looking to the future, I am enthusiastic about the approach of certain organisations and specifically the emergence of modern FM apprenticeship schemes and mature student initiatives. Fifteen months ago, in partnership with a service provider, I jointly devised a recruitment programme loosely based on The Apprentice television show; and previously I worked in partnership with a conglomerate in the rail industry to recruit 20 managers of the future - interestingly, all selected were from different industries as diverse as marketing, PR, FM, construction, HR and finance.

Churn: a fact of FM life

But the majority of firms in the industry are still not willing to invest enough money or resources in the development of existing or new employees via internal or external training schemes/courses. If only they did, they would avoid acute staff shortages in certain departments and expensive marketing and recruitment programmes. There are a couple of reasons why they don't currently do this: many see the costs as exorbitant; others see facilities managers and the FM sector as a whole as increasingly nomadic. Most facilities managers seem to like to move jobs, and often companies (as roles are often contract or client-specific), every two or three years - if they haven't been offered promotion, progression and/or training.

Other causes behind this pattern of churn include a rapidly expanding industry (worth billions and thus generating opportunities), ever prevalent recruitment advertising, growing network of contacts, different (more attractive) working environments and cultures, and promises of better working conditions including salary increases, car allowances and bonuses.

Facilities managers who move around more frequently than used to be the norm often play the market very well. They are typically motivated by gaining different kinds of hands-on experience in varied working environments. This extra experience in the short- to medium-term will in itself make these facilities managers more marketable and enable them to gain a greater level of remuneration.

Firms in the FM sector are usually asking for an extensive foundation of expertise. They are putting a substantial premium on softer management skills and look for prospective employees to have a sound mix of qualifications, breadth of exposure to both the outsourced and in-house environments, commercial acumen and the flexibility to integrate and work well with existing teams and environments.

What must be clear, however, is that there is not one path that all should follow. There will always be the demand for incongruous talents. Receptionists will (hopefully) never be asked to fix boilers. But the industry is still a concoction of individual specialists, brought together in a sophisticated manner by those lucky enough to be masters of totality in FM terms.

About the author

Peter Forshaw is Managing Director at recruitment specialists Maxwell Stephens. Please visit www.maxwellstephens.com