

## Facilities Management - an overview

Facilities Management (FM), even in the UK, is not well understood, yet it is far from new as a management concept and now constitutes a multi-million pound industry with a major impact on business as a whole. It is thus a strange sort of animal, still trying to explain and promote itself, at the same time as being well established and now entering a more mature phase.

In looking at the development of FM over the past 20 years, it is useful to see it as part of general management thinking, moving from an emphasis on efficiency to effectiveness, from that which only allows you to do the same thing better or faster to that which helps you to do a different thing, or the right thing at the right time.

FM was originally defined in terms of the management of buildings and in particular the hardware of buildings. It had its origin in the increased complexity and cost of running buildings and the scale of new corporate organisations. Time was when what you needed to operate a business was cheap and simple and could be virtually ignored as a management issue. Just so long as you could keep yourself warm and dry with reasonable power, a desk and a telephone, you could do whatever you wanted. Then came the I.T. revolution with its massive change in the nature of buildings and the sophistication of business support. Buildings became bigger, environmental control more complex, IT management critical, change more frequent, costs exorbitant and what had been relegated to the role of "housekeeping" could suddenly no longer be ignored. Understanding and managing the facilities and systems which supported organisations now became worthy of academic study and boardroom consideration. FM, as a special sub-set of management, a science and a discipline in its own right, was born. Institutions grew up, special qualifications became available. This process of professionalisation was slower in certain countries than others but the spread of the new discipline was as resolute and inevitable as the growth in competitiveness of business itself. Thus it was that, back in 1995 just as Poland was re-establishing itself within the wider western economy, the Technical University of Silesia, with considerable foresight and perseverance, formed links with the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden and established the first academic course in Poland in Building Evaluation and Facilities Management.

At the start of its brief history FM was thus all about controlling costs and improving efficiency. Starting with the building itself, its heating, lighting, cleaning, building maintenance, and then moving rapidly onto support services such as printing, catering, communications and security, hardly anything outside the core business process escaped scrutiny and improvement.

First of all the task was getting the message of FM itself understood - that this "housekeeping" was important and worthy of the title "management". Next was a phase which examined each item and each process to see whether it could be done better. Benchmarking, performance criteria, systems of measurement and monitoring were evolved. At the same time the idea of outsourcing was born and separating out those activities on which the business depended but which were not core skills and which could possibly be done better by others.

Thus, starting to understand risk management, resource management, service improvement saw the handing over of a whole series of in-house departments to specialist outsiders. Goodbye the office canteen and faithful office cleaners, the security personnel and the mail room and hello the outside contractor. The process happened to coincide with a period of "downsizing" and, not surprisingly, was accompanied by a certain amount of scepticism (not to say hostility) by those who were affected and who saw this as a short term accountancy trick - worse still as something which eroded the culture of the organisation and avoided responsibility - defensive criticisms but ones which nevertheless held a certain amount of truth and whose validity is only starting to be accepted today.

The process was indeed cut throat and was not always welcome but it created a radical and useful shake-up. For the first time large corporations and government departments were forced to see that in a competitive world "all right" was not "good enough". Costs tumbled, response times were reduced, but what was most important was the realisation that these "functions" were indeed "services", that they constituted a whole platform of support on which the business itself depended and which allowed it in turn to become more responsive to the market, freed it up to do what it needed to do, allowed it to change and to focus on what was happening "out there", instead of becoming bogged down by the minutiae of day to day existence.

The process was fragmented however, with dozens of individual operations, individual outsourcing contracts and short term objectives. The relationship between support and the business process was still not fully articulated. Essentially there wasn't a relationship. Services, like servants or dutiful housewives were still considered something which should tactfully sink into the background, facilities managers were still regarded as operatives who shouldn't bother their pretty little heads with issues pertinent to the business itself. An interesting example could be seen with respect to space planning. With some notable exceptions the process of effecting physical change within the building got passed from architects to surveyors to building contractors, with savings in professional fees and possibly with better response times but seldom with a debate about how the nature of the office might affect worker performance and how it might require to change with changes in the nature of the business itself. Thus partitions were moved, new fit-outs created, with little understanding of what this might mean to the improvement or otherwise of the work process.

With this wild gallop after efficiency, other casualties also started to occur. The keenest price for a particular service did not always mean the most appropriate service. On other occasions passing on the work merely meant shifting responsibility for a problem which continued to lie within the host organisation; or there were failures to understand what the real core activities within the organisation were and that on occasions facilities like reprographics might have an important interaction with public relations or space planning with knowledge management.

Other casualties to the general business came about with the amount of bureaucracy that arose in monitoring this plethora of contracts, with more time sometimes being spent formulating the contracts than actually doing the work, or the service failing to meet needs because of changes in circumstance and the inflexibility of the contract, or the poor management of expectations or the use of inappropriate measurement criteria within control systems designed to measure performance.

With this hard won experience there have recently been significant further developments in the skills and services that make up Facilities Management. Firstly there has been a consolidation in the provision of services which has gone hand in hand with the growth in size of the companies providing FM, producing further economies, providing greater flexibility in service provision and enabling cross fertilisation of information and experience between one service and another. Secondly there has been a qualitative change in line with that general change in management philosophy referred to earlier, a change of emphasis from efficiency to effectiveness.

Increasing competitiveness in business means an increasing need to adapt rapidly to changing market conditions. This calls for flexibility in how departments are configured and in the arrangement of support facilities. Although not easy to achieve it is essentially this that FM has been attempting to provide in the first phase of its existence. More recently business competitiveness has called for further and more difficult responses - the ability to innovate, to manage knowledge not just information, the ability to be creative and adventurous. These are subtle issues and ones possibly more suitable for the H.R. department or senior management, but, insofar as FM has the ability to set the context within which people operate, it is a challenge for FM too. It is this that FM, with its wider, more co-ordinated and qualitative remit has the ability to address. The move represents an involvement with things psychological and not just physical. Buildings have of course always had this dimension. We have always appreciated that where one works has always affected how one works, it is just that it is more difficult to evaluate and control this aspect of the working environment.

FM has made huge strides in its brief history as a formal discipline, from not being considered an issue at all, to being a major industry with the ability to work closely with its host organisations to effect an ever increasing performance. How it will rise to this new qualitative challenge is not clear, but certain clues are already appearing - its ability to be co-ordinated, to integrate with all aspects of the organisation including HR, to focus on the long and not just the short term, to form relationships and to invest in various forms of joint venturing and business partnering. What is happening in the UK with various P.F.I. initiatives in the provision of schools and hospitals suggests what is possible in terms of redesigning the service itself, but even this experiment has been simplistic in terms of understanding what these organisations actually require. It will be very interesting to see what will happen in the next 20 years and what the younger countries to the FM club, with their fresher appreciation of the opportunity in front of them, will make of the situation.

Hugh Anderson  
**haa design**