

What is Facility Management?

I have had this question asked many times from my peers and associates. We all understand what the words together imply, but what are the job specifications? What are these “nuisances” that must be handled by facility management professionals on a daily basis? How much of a benefit does a facility management service create? These are all questions I hear quite frequently and, from time to time, find myself stumbling over the answers. I find that this is because the every day work done by a professional facility manager is somewhat obscure and abstract.

The International Facility Management Association defines facility management as ¹a profession that encompasses multiple disciplines to ensure functionality of the built environment by integrating people, place, process, and technology. The skills of a facility manager can be broken down into two sections, the hard skills – tasks performed through physical or technological means – and the soft skills – tasks performed through mental intuitiveness.

Hard Skills

- Electrical wiring and power distribution
- Carpentry
- Plumbing and water-works
- Operation and maintenance of HVAC
- Spatial Planning
- Civil and structural engineering principals

Soft Skills

- Customer Relations
- Contractor coordination and support
- Team-building
- Technical Judgment
- Time Management
- Business Continuity
- Financial Awareness

This is only a sample of the lengthy list of possible abilities of the facility manager, and this is because there is a myriad of skills and competencies that come into use as a facility manager. So then, is it possible to be a master facility manager? The answer is simple. Yes.

Every aspiring facility manager should have an FM role model. This is because it is important to understand how successful facility managers have molded their careers. For decades middle-aged men have dominated the facility management field with years upon years of experience with the “hard skills” needed to maintain a facility. More recently, however, the rising trend has been towards a more diverse maintenance organization with employees exemplifying both the “soft skills” and the “hard skills” necessary to be successful. Well, the facility management field is now seeing a more youthful pool of prospective employees, fresh out-of-college, with most of the “soft skills” already well in hand. Many of these soon-to-be facility managers, unfortunately, do not have enough of the hands on experience required to be a maintenance technician. Fortunately, there is a solution to this gap in abilities that has been around for centuries.

The key to overcoming this gap in abilities is mentoring. The skilled tradesmen of today need to advise their inexperienced apprentices of the best practices available for the completion of every labor-intensive craft. In turn, these apprentices need to be able to manage their teacher’s time and capabilities and be able to provide other benefits to the company as they struggle to grasp the complexities of building management.

¹International Facility Management Association. Retrieved March 13, 2007, http://www.ifma.org/what_is_fm/index.cfm

It is never too early for a career tradesman to begin the mentoring process. There is a large portion of tradesmen in the world today who are approaching the age of retirement and have no capacity for succession because they have nobody that can replace the talents acquired through years and years of hard work. Choosing an apprentice is a difficult decision, and although there may not be a clear choice, word of mouth or a simple classified advertisement is likely to stir up the interests of eager career seekers. The more knowledge and ability that is retained within the company, the easier the transition from old to new will be. I feel that many experienced tradesman fear that a youthful employee may overtake his or her position at a future point and decide against the idea of mentoring. In actuality, the mentoring process allows the company room for growth while planning for continuity.

Continuity in this business is no simple task, so it must be planned for. The ability to plan for business continuity is something rarely thought of when first organizing a company, however, a successful entrepreneurship will have to develop a continuity plan if it intends to remain in business for decades to come. In the facility maintenance industry this tends to occur through work partnerships – where an experienced employee will pair with an inexperienced employee so that the company workforce can continue to develop.

Although planning for the future is very important, what is most important to being a successful facility manager is being flexible. The master facility manager is the “Jack-of-all-trades”, able to make decisions or defer decisions, implement a new system or stick with the old-fashioned. The more ably a facility manager can adapt to a situation, the more valuable that person will be. A good facility manager will often be looked to for troubleshooting and advice. This is why progressive education and adaptation to an ever-altering environment is the most important trait for a facility manager. A competent facility manager will be able to harness the majority of the hard and soft skills already named. A successful facility manager just might be the most dynamic, resourceful, knowledgeable professional within an organization.

The two most unacknowledged skills that a facility manager needs to exemplify are customer relations and the ability to network. Facility management is customer service for the building and its unknowing occupants. The facility manager must be able to interact with the building’s occupants in order to understand their wants and needs. These may range from menial tasks such as changing a fluorescent bulb or replacing a plumbing fixture to complex jobs such as remodeling an area or upgrading an out-of-date system. Since much of the work done through a facility management firm is outsourcing, that same facility manager then needs to be able to relate the message to a contracting specialist. As easy as this may sound, an inexperienced facility manager will soon find that contracting areas each have their own language, making it a definitive requirement to comprehend electrical, HVAC, and carpentry terminology. A well-networked facility manager should have an extensive list of available contractors able to handle any array of jobs that may arise.

Contracting a competent facility management service allows the critical operations within the premises to occur without a flaw. A facility management service allows others the ability to focus on the aspects that make them successful without having to bother with the nuisances of continuously maintaining a property. A good management service will continuously seek ways to cut costs through new and improved procedures of operation and technological advances.

With all of this being said, how does a company manage to not employ a facility management firm?