

Defining a

CAREER PA

for Emerging
FM Professionals

By David Isaacson

THE

The human side of facilities management is partly about recognizing and fostering the facility management professional's personal career goals. Facilities managers (FMs) need to focus on how they can grow and succeed, and that can be driven by how they position themselves as a strategic resource within an organization. It's also about recognizing that FMs are in a customer service business—the building occupants, whether they are students, faculty, or staff—are the customers, and it's critical to understand their specific needs and how the facility supports their objectives.

These two aspects go hand in hand, and this article will address how understanding and working with facilities users can help facilities managers become more strategic and advance in their careers.

Facilities management (FM) is about much more than just maintenance. Consider career goals within the staff.

CAREERS IN FACILITY MANAGEMENT

There are a range of job titles and skill sets that comprise the field of facilities management. Understanding the differences in these roles and what skills and experience are needed is essential to navigating a career path in FM. One way of assessing the field is to break it into two domains that tend to encompass the FM profession: Maintenance vs. Facilities. Although the titles may vary, they touch upon an increasing amount of common ground, and for those who want to grow their career, there are certain skills that can open up that career path.

The facilities management profession is perceived as inherently operational. Goals are defined in the short term (less than one year) and budget planning typically uses a past performance approach. But in modern management, the expectations are clearly more than just doing your job the way that it has been done before.

For instance, as construction projects get more complicated and buildings become smarter, the role of the facilities manager evolves from operational to strategic, and a new set of skills has become necessary in the managerial toolkit. A strategic and holistic approach, including decision making based on data and financial analysis, is necessary to take a facilities management career to the next level.

The future **senior facilities officer** must align the real estate and facilities strategy with the organization's long-term goals. In order to do so, this executive must be able to support decision-making processes with solid analysis and understand the financial impact of those decisions.

In addition to the technical expertise that the facilities manager acquires throughout his or her career, there are some distinct characteristics that organizational leaders expect from this executive:

- Leadership
- Financial and analytical capability
- Operational and performance analysis
- Strategic vision
- Communication and political skills

THE DAILY VIEW: MAINTENANCE ROLES

The view that a maintenance staff takes of a facility portfolio is short-term, with a focus on the daily tasks that must be completed. Those in the maintenance field—with titles such as **engineer, technician, planner, supervisor, building manager, and janitorial and housekeeping** staff—are in the thick of the daily work of running a facility. Maintenance staffs serve as the firefighters of the FM world, responding to customer calls about leaky faucets, icy steps, and burnt-out bulbs. They are also responsible for scheduled daily upkeep of buildings, including cleanliness, trash removal, and groundskeeping.

The objectives of the maintenance department include cleanliness, safety, and efficiency for student customers, faculty, staff, and visitors. Technology in the maintenance realm may include computer maintenance management systems (CMMS), either as standalone or as part of an integrated workplace management system (IWMS). Work orders are just as often managed by spreadsheets or even Post-it notes.

The **building manager** position can serve as a gateway into managerial positions. Building managers generally deal with one facility and oversee employee and visitor safety, building maintenance, repair, and upgrades. They also ensure optimal and efficient facility operations, and comply with environmental, safety, and health procedures. Key responsibilities include coordinating building maintenance and repairs that affect normal building operation, updating occupants about electrical, water, and other service outages and scheduled shutdowns, and dealing with changes to space assignments in their facilities. Building managers usually oversee building security, implement emergency plans and, in the case of an actual emergency, assist emergency response teams in assessing building condition, locating missing personnel, shutting off utilities, and delivering status reports.

THE BIG PICTURE: FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

In the world of facilities management, the concerns are both short- and long-term. With titles like engineer, planner, analyst, manager, director, and vice president, the FM team must be concerned not only with serving staff and guests, but also reporting to executives. Facilities managers typically find themselves between worlds. One minute they are presenting capital budget requests to the chief financial officer, and the next they are in a basement examining a busted boiler.

FMs usually deal with current and deferred maintenance, new construction, and capital investment projects—including budgeting for all of the above. Their objectives include spending an

annual budget efficiently, saving the hospital money on projects, and complying with health and safety codes, minimizing risk to people and the organization. Some FMs employ technology to become more successful in their daily tasks and long-term planning. This technology can range from basic spreadsheets to CMMS, IWMS, and facilities capital planning solutions.

A typical role in FM is that of **facilities manager**. Facilities managers are responsible for the management of services and processes that support the core business of an organization. They ensure that an organization has the most suitable working environment for its employees and their activities. Duties vary, but facilities managers generally focus on using best business practices to improve efficiency by reducing operating costs and increasing productivity. This is a wide field with a diverse range of responsibilities, which are dependent on the structure and size of the organization. Facilities managers are involved in both strategic planning and daily operations, particularly in relation to buildings and premises.

Responsibilities include:

- Procurement and contract management
- Space management
- Oversight of building and grounds maintenance, housekeeping, catering and vending, health and safety, security, and utilities and communications infrastructure

Another role, the **vice president of facilities management**, often has direct reports and responsibilities across a variety of disciplines, including operations and maintenance, asset or infrastructure or facilities management, real estate, and sustainability, which includes energy or utilities management. Other departments may include construction and design, or even planning. Technology plays an increasingly important role, and some facilities departments have their own technology staff in support of FM systems, CADD, GIS, and desktop services. The vice president of facilities management may roll up under a variety of departments, including finance and operations, depending on the organization.

There's also an evolving FM role of the **senior facilities officer**. This new position, ideal for any organization that wants to manage their facilities strategically, combines business acumen, financial skills, facilities expertise, and the ability to build effective internal coalitions with the organization's key groups and business units.

The senior facilities officer uses this mix of skills to establish multiyear facilities capital planning and management programs that deliver focused, tangible benefits to the organization: lower risks, reduced costs, and improved customer satisfaction.



FOUR ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO ADVANCE YOUR CAREER

So where do you start to take control of your career and become more valuable to your institution, organization, and to yourself? Regardless of background and skill set, there are specific actions that anyone can take that will open up opportunities for advancement in the FM field:

- Understand the Business: Speak the Lingo
- Keep Your Skills Current: Get the Credentials
- Network: Think Organizationally
- Become More Strategic: See the Big Picture

Facilities professionals can advance in their careers by acquiring skills both inside and outside of the technical FM arena, building effective working relationships with key groups across the organization, and adopting a proactive, programmatic approach to facilities capital planning and management.

ACTION 1. UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS: SPEAK THE LINGO

The first action is to understand the business you are in. If you don't know what value your company brings to its customers, then how do you know you are doing the right thing? How do your colleagues describe the business? Understand the terminology, financials, business, and facilities. This will help you communicate with your peers and be in alignment with their objectives.

Once you have a good handle on the business, then you are in a position to make recommendations on how facilities can support the organization's mission. Be seen as a partner in helping the business reach its goals, and you will be involved in decisions about facilities before they are made. You will be able to show how you contribute to the bottom line.

ACTION 2. KEEP YOUR SKILLS CURRENT: GET THE CREDENTIALS

This is not just about understanding the latest equipment and controls used to manage buildings, although this knowledge is important. As you better understand the business, you also need to understand how it is measured. What metrics are used by the organization? What are the financial implications of decisions that are being made? Can you show how your performance contributes to the organization's success?

Take financial courses; get your MBA. Being a businessperson, not just a mechanic, will make you more valuable to your current and future employers. But don't ignore your technical skills. Master domain knowledge. Get credentials in the FM field (e.g., technical degrees, certifications, professional association credentials such as APPA's EFP or CEFP) to go along with business knowledge. Embrace new FM tools, and get comfortable with emerging technologies (e.g., mobile data collection).

ACTION 3. NETWORK: THINK ORGANIZATIONALLY

Everyone talks about how networking can help you find that next job. But networking is more than just making a career change. Start within your own organization. Build relationships with the business owners, and you become a team player, a part-

ner in their business—not just someone who reacts to problems. This goes back to the first action, understanding the business. How can the facilities team help the business meet its goals? Whether it is through improving production, providing a better environment for learning, or upgrading research capabilities, the facilities manager can add significant value to decisions being made about the buildings. However, if you don't know what's going on, you will never have the opportunity to add value.

Of course, networking outside your organization is also important, but not just for changing jobs (though this is one of the best ways to find a new position). Networking with your peers can shed light on new approaches to solving problems. Share industry best practices and you might find new techniques to leverage for your organization. Others can also learn from you, and you can quickly be recognized as an FM expert. Professional development programs such as APPA's annual conference, Supervisor's Toolkit, the Institute for Facilities Management, and the Leadership Academy provide ample opportunities to network with your colleagues.

ACTION 4. BECOME MORE STRATEGIC

Are you the first person to get called when there is a problem—too hot, too cold, something spilled—but the last to hear about plans for the business and how it will impact your facilities? Are you always trying to justify your budget or even your department as a whole?

Too many FM professionals are considered as an afterthought by their institution or business. But a key to advancing is to be seen as strategic and valuable to the organization. You can do this by understanding the organizational impact of facilities decisions now and in the future. If you have effectively networked within the organization, you can understand the direction the business is heading. Then, you can make recommendations that will have a direct impact on the bottom line. This allows you to demonstrate the return on investment that executives and the organization as a whole will gain from strategic decisions made about your facilities.

SUMMARY

There are a number of actions you can take to enhance your career with your current or future employer. Becoming more strategic and being a team player allows you to be seen as a partner in the business rather than just Mr. Fix-it or Ms. Cleanup. By being connected throughout the industry, you can bring innovative solutions to bear on existing and future problems. By demonstrating value to the organization, you become a key participant in business decisions. More important, you enhance your value, your bottom line, and your career. ☛

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