

The role of the facility manager into the future.



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For decades, we have been under the belief or impression that getting to your office desk by 7, 8 or 9 am and working to 5, 6, 7pm (depending on your business perceived or actual needs and also what your employer demands) proved that you were committed and loyal to the company. Often there was a perspective by many employers that unless you were at your office desk by a certain time you did not have the dedication for what it took to be successful at that company.

Various corporations and superannuation funds have now invested so much capital into commercial property. The thought therefore of a paradigm shift in the use of CBD facilities in terms of a changing workplace creates significant risk to these investor/ owners and one which they will want to resist at all costs. Arguably, tenant occupiers will not be prepared or able to agree to the current rent levels if they are only a % of their employees can be based in a building.

The centralised workplace has proven to be a great place to achieve team goals, developing different ways to collaborate and to build broader business-based communities. Furthermore, long standing business relationships and networks with like-minded people are established that add significant value over time to the economy. The human psychology demands interaction to accelerate creativity and to achieve better outcomes compared to doing something yourself.

Over the next few years, we will be seeing much greater emphasis on “flexible and agile working”. Various forward-thinking companies such as Dell, Google, have been leading the way with this type of agile working. Within the FM and services industry Sodexo are recognised as a company that approaches this vision well.

During this Covid period, it can be said that certain types of business can deliver similar levels of business performance by not working in an office. For example, a large global insurance company based in London told employees back in April 2020 that they were not to return to the office until at least 2021. Their fiscal performance since Covid has not been impacted and employees are continuing to achieve and exceed on their goals by working from home. This organisation is now questioning the need for expensive real estate in the heart of London going forward.

So, what does this mean for the future of the modern facility manager? In many ways, there will be an expectation by building owners, users, and the visiting public that the safety, cleanliness, and the environmental standards of buildings will be to a much higher standard than ever before. If you consider, for example, the facets of the built environment of a typical high-rise commercial building, an increase in standards will be expected across several service categories. This will include cleaning and sanitation, waste management and safe handling and disposal of waste, air quality and filtration systems, movement of goods including courier type services, security monitoring of activities that create high risks to a building, catering and hygiene services etc. In essence, bringing together a new set of standards around “People – Process – Place” will be the challenge for the future facility manager responsible for managing large, multi-occupancy buildings.

The Facility Management industry has grown significantly over the past 20 years in Australia and of course around the world. With this level of growth, it has meant that a large % of people managing FM portfolios have entered the industry without the necessary training and qualifications. This is not a fault of the facility manager, more the outcome of business pressures to attract people from other industries to deliver work for clients that are outsourcing at a fast pace.

Post Covid, it will be inevitable that the skills, demands and expectations of the modern facility manager will be higher than ever before. In general terms, facility managers are not always trained in areas such as environmental monitoring, air filtration systems, cross-contamination risk, hygiene controls nor have subject matter knowledge on how to monitor and control cleanliness and

sanitisation standards. Over the years, facility managers have relied heavily upon their outsourced provider to have the training and knowledge in certain technical and non-technical areas of service delivery. Although, this has been a normal practice in the past, it may not be acceptable in the future. The modern facility manager will have to have the knowledge and capability to have a wider lens on key high-risk aspects of service delivery. This includes understanding the procurement cycle through to how it impacts at ground level.

Does this mean that the Facility Management industry should be lobbying and advocating for licensing and registration for facility managers? Currently, there are no barriers to entry to become a facility manager, however you could be responsible for multi-million dollar budgets, complex workplace issues, high levels of risk management, safety, and environmental requirements etc.

Effectively, decisions that facility managers make on a day to day basis can impact the safety and wellbeing of employees, the work environment, the cost, and risk of maximising and optimising the performance of the overall built environment. If the industry adopted a more comprehensive, grass roots approach to education, training and developing future facility managers, would this provide better value to building owners, buyers of service and other key stakeholders?

20 years ago, when I first became involved as Chairman of the Victorian Branch of the Facility Management Association (FMA), we debated the need to explore how to get FM into career pathways at school level. Two decades on, as an industry we have not been able to achieve this vision.

Perhaps a way to consider the development of the future facility manager is create an apprenticeship type scheme, one where we can create content that is attractive to career advisors to promote the option to become an apprentice facility manager. No one at school leaver age ever considers going into facilities management, is this because the industry has no identity with school career advisors. If the industry can leverage interest at school level, it may also support our drive to build better gender diversity into our industry.

If we had a structured indentured training program, it could mean that by the time a facility manager is around 21 years of age, they will have developed a strong platform in which to launch their career in the industry which would invariably produce long term success and levels of sustainability.

Such an apprentice style training program could provide the skills and tools to equip the future facility manager to cope with the likes of Post Covid demands. It will give the upcoming facility manager enhanced technical and management knowledge to ensure they can deliver a more integrated service when managing and protecting the assets of building owners and their user occupiers.

The Facility Management industry including the FMA has achieved a great deal in advancing the science and professionalism of facility practices. As we are now entering into a new era of risk, fear, and opportunity, it is important that we develop different pathways to staying not only relevant but offering the next evolution of our industry.