

Are we facing an FM brain-drain?

Contributed by Richard Elvidge, July 2005

In order to address the factors that have led to the current perception of the 'brain-drain' in FM, an investment of time, knowledge and money is required to define and develop the FM brand, its professionals and its training and certification methods - all of which will in turn strengthen the status of FM within today's economy.

At a time when buildings are run as businesses, generating revenue whilst accumulating running costs, FM is fast becoming an essential and therefore a rapidly expanding market. Companies realise that the maintenance of their premises is often more expensive than their initial construction, and that sustaining them alongside core business strategies is too time-consuming - leading them to seek partnerships with specialist facilities teams.

Recent press has implied that the FM industry is experiencing a professional 'brain-drain' culture, hinting that the status of FM has not grown in conjunction with its increasing relevance and importance to today's economy. As an experienced recruitment consultant, I am able to view the market from a unique perspective where I can respond to the issues surrounding FM expressed by my clients, whilst servicing the candidates I place. I believe there are key issues stunting the development of the FM industry and the FM 'brand' including the perception and definition of FM, and key staffing issues such as retention, training and professional development.

The problem of defining FM contributing to this so called 'brain-drain', I believe, is the problem that the definition of FM has become ambiguous; a large intake of professionals from a variety of backgrounds has resulted in a diverse and confused sector. This can be observed simply by the analysis of FM job titles. As a recruiter, I am aware that there are 15 or more different names for a facilities manager, including: building manager, property manager, building surveyor, project manager and contracts manager. This assorted range of job titles can make it difficult for a client or company to target the correct candidate for their business needs.

Another issue facing the industry is that the perception of FM can also change as quickly as contracts turn over, and although clients and employers have recognised a need for a solid FM infrastructure to be devised, some negative and detrimental attitudes to the facilities function are still prominent. The market is sometimes viewed as the 'poor cousin' of building services and during economic downturn is frequently the first department to experience cut-backs.

This opinion is slowly being diminished due to instances where successful FM has proved vital, for example the recent MRSA incidents within hospitals. Such high-profile cases have helped to highlight the importance of specialist cleaning contractors and ultimately help to increase the credibility of the FM function.

My experience of interviewing FM candidates has highlighted that facilities managers can be responsible for up to 20 building functions, or as little as one. As the facilities manager role encompasses so many different responsibilities, it can be difficult for companies to administer effective training and therefore the industry cannot develop as quickly as the demands on it require.

The question of background I have previously made reference to the broad range of experience of professionals within the FM industry; for example, I have placed facilities managers from an office/admin environment as well as estates and property management background. As FM has had no formalised qualifications in the past or defined career paths, candidates can be from a number of educational backgrounds, adding further to the market's diversity. The most common type of facilities manager my teams work with will have started their careers as a service engineer and then developed into their FM role from there.

The outcome of such situations is that we interview candidates with different qualifications and certification, where each working background offers its own strengths and weaknesses. Again effective, consistent training is hard to install. This variance in candidates' experience and qualifications also has a significant effect on FM salaries, which like the job title itself can fluctuate from employer to employer.

As a result many of the larger blue-chip organisations are now hiring experienced and well-rounded facilities managers to troubleshoot an individual contract in the short-term. ", " as it is known involves the use of a team of managers working to bring a contract to a particular point. Although on the surface this appears to be a solution, this type of operational management can lead to a significant loss of knowledge and expertise in the long-term. These contracts are often handed back over to a group of managers who lack the experience or autonomy to run them efficiently and within budget due to the fact that they are missing vital knowledge in their skills base where they have been taken off certain projects instead of being supervised and developed.

More recently, the industry has been keen to attract graduates into FM; indeed degrees in FM are now available but this has only been the case for the last few years. The industry needs to promote itself to its potential future stars (both graduates and non-graduates), who may currently be unclear as to what a career in FM will hold, including financial and professional rewards. As with any specialist industry, targeting the right potential candidates is an important task for the key companies in this sector. These companies must invest more funds into marketing and defining themselves as an 'employer of choice' to candidates with the skills they require to continue to elevate FM as a rewarding career and an essential function in the economy.

I believe that as the FM role becomes increasingly specialised, we will see more managers who leave through company redundancies and role ambiguity. Employers must use the knowledge and experience of their facilities managers so that they can retain them as a human resource and increase their competitive advantage.
The need for training and development

In conclusion, it can be suggested that FM is experiencing a 'brain-drain' due to the fact that the knowledge and the roles of its professionals are frequently varied and training is unstructured or lacking. In order to make improvements to this situation and in turn strengthen the status of FM within today's economy, an investment of time, knowledge and money is required to define and develop the FM brand, its professionals and its training and certification methods.

Organisations such as the BIFM and training bodies such as City & Guilds are integral to this progression and provide both employers and candidates with regulated training and development.

It is vital for such a diverse industry to continue to attract professionals from different backgrounds; however, it must be supported by training procedures that are able to adapt to the requirements of different staff members and organisations. There is a growing need for FM to become a more regulated marketplace where, like others, it boasts a common standard in its professionals, job specifications and training and development routes.

Although there is evidence that supports current talk of an FM 'brain-drain', I believe that this is a criticism that will be short-lived, as professional bodies and employers begin to take steps to resolve the issues facing the industry and its future.

About the author

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