



## Facilities

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# Facilities management: lost, or regained?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The objective of this paper is to examine the continuing debate over the nature, scope and definition of facilities management and the implications of FM practice in the field of outsourcing for the development of the field and the profession.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper offers both a conceptual review of key issues in the definition of facilities management and a critique of these definitions in the context of the popular identity of facilities management as a means of generating cost savings through outsourcing.

**Findings** – The discussion asserts that, perhaps contrary to the many published doubts expressed over the possibility of achieving consensus on the scope of facilities management, an emerging and broadly consensual model of facilities management can be discerned. This model, it is suggested, is inhibited from further development primarily because of a lack of leadership in the professional and academic communities together with a preoccupation by necessity of the FM profession with operational imperatives.

**Originality/value** – The paper, through synthesis and critique, offers a variant perspective on the debate about the nature of facilities management.

**Keywords** Facilities management, Definitional issues, Disciplinary perspectives, Outsourcing, Facilities

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

For those who care to seek them out, facilities management (abbreviated henceforth as FM), like many a gemstone, presents several facets to the world. First, there is the occupational-professional aspect with many thousands, perhaps millions, of people globally involved on a day-to-day basis with the management of organizations and their facilities and services. Second, various national and international associations exist to promote the concept of facilities management and provide a basis for professionalization and knowledge exchange. For example, the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) is a worldwide association with over 19,000 members in 60 countries. Thirdly, facilities management education – teaching and research – has taken root in the higher education sectors of some countries, providing the beginnings of a system of credential-based entry to managerial-level employment.

However, underpinning the foregoing observations, which on the surface appear to indicate a success story, is a critical and unresolved “macro” tension that itself



comprises two inter-related dimensions or “micro” tensions. First, there is an absence of any generalized agreement as to what facilities management actually “is”, although, as will be argued, a “preferred” view has begun to emerge in recent years. Second, and in partial consequence of these definitional issues, there is a lack of clarity as to the nature, status and image and identity of facilities management within the organizational world, with the emerging, preferred, and holistic view of facilities management concepts and practices promulgated by many of the field’s professionals in danger of being negated by a key means of delivering FM services – outsourcing. We shall examine each of these in turn within this paper with a view to distilling progressive recommendations for how such tensions might be resolved.

## 2. Definitional issues

The absence of any agreement as to what facilities management actually “is” – as a domain of coherent knowledge, and as a set of skills and practices – is exacerbated by different viewpoints on these subjects, and different traditions of practice arising in those countries where facilities management has developed the most – notably the USA, the UK and The Netherlands. This is reflected at the simplest level where in the USA and UK the term “facilities management” is used in preference to the Dutch “facility management”.

An accurately reliable history of the development of facilities management has yet to be written. In essence, FM has a 30-40 year global pedigree. As the International Facilities Management Association notes, in the USA “the first step toward the formation of a specialized organization occurred in December 1978 when Herman Miller Research Corporation hosted a conference on “Facility Influence on Productivity,” in Ann Arbor, Michigan” ([www.ifma.org/tools/media\\_room/brief\\_history.cfm](http://www.ifma.org/tools/media_room/brief_history.cfm), accessed 8 October, 2010). From a European perspective, FM emerged about 25 years ago, primarily as a means of linking real estate and construction industry concerns with the productive use of workplace building assets in light of the fact that in those days, at least 25 percent of the assets of the corporate balance sheets of their companies were tied up in real estate assets requiring effective management.

In the 25th anniversary edition of the main academic journal for the field, *Facilities*, Grimshaw (2007, p. 411) wrote that facilities management: “is serviced by a global network of FM educational providers fully integrated with their relevant professional bodies and with an active academic community that has generated a wealth of challenging ideas that have illuminated its development”. Put kindly, this seems an over-optimistic evaluation. As de Bruijn *et al.* (2001, pp. 477-478) note in comparing the academic development of hospitality and facilities management, the then extant attempts to define facilities management amounted to little more than noting that it involves the application of generalized management knowledge and techniques to the management of building services. In a damning indictment, worth quoting at length, Howard (2002, p. 25) writes: “Facilities Management” is itself a form of Management Speak of recent vintage – I have met no one outside the field of ‘the built environment’ who, on hearing the term, recognizes it at first encounter”. He goes on to note that:

But even those who call themselves “Efems” don’t agree on what it is. Americans see it as a matter of “Real Estate Asset Value”; the Dutch as a branch of “Customer Service”; to the Brits it can be “Roof repairs and Boiler maintenance”. We have even, grandly, expanded the title into “Total Facilities Management” ... for those who wanted to persuade company

accountants to “outsource” to them all their “non-core business”. All eggs are to be massed in one basket, from site security systems to the IT intranet, from catering to cleaning, not forgetting “greening the working place environment and taking care of sick building syndrome”.

It is possible to have some sympathy for Howard’s views on “management speak”. In 2008 Frapin-Beaugé *et al.* (2008, p. 388) argued that the British Institute of Facilities Management’s then web site definition of the area made “desperate sounding claims” implying “organizational apocalypse” for those not engaging with facilities management. Though perhaps mild by the standards of the inflated language of academic management, that definition merits consideration:

Effective facilities management, combining resources and activities, is vital to the success of any organization. At a corporate level, it contributes to the delivery of strategic and operational objectives. On a day-to-day level, effective facilities management provides a safe and efficient working environment, which is essential to the performance of any business – whatever its size and scope ... [.] The facilities management profession has come of age. Its practitioners require skill and knowledge. The sector definition continues to expand to include the management of an increasingly broad range of tangible assets, support services and people skills ... [.] Facilities management is a vital strategic discipline because it “translates” the high-level, strategic change required by senior decision makers into day-to-day reality for people in their work or living space. ... [.] Successful organizations in future will approach FM as an integral part of their strategic plan. Those organizations that treat FM as a “commodity overhead” will be at a significant strategic disadvantage.

Hyperbole and obliqueness aside, at least two hypotheses can be inferred from Howard’s unfriendly summary – first, that the lack of agreement and clarity as to what FM “is” results from differences of emphasis within diverse national FM communities of practice and, secondly, that FM is, in essence a fad, a wholly spurious enterprise.

On the first of these points, we can observe from a casual review of the literature employed that different countries and regions do indeed, as Howard states, place a different emphasis on the overall nature and role of FM. The British Institute of Facilities Management definition cited earlier is more expansive but does not radically deviate from the agreed European Standard defining FM, as, at both strategic and tactical level, being concerned with “Integration of processes within an organization to maintain and develop the agreed services which support and improve the effectiveness of its primary activities” (European Committee for Standardization-Nederlands Normalisatie-instituut, 2006, pp. 5-7). A recent study of the FM profession in the US concluded by recommending an undergraduate curriculum in which “major” and “engineering core” subjects outnumbered facilities management subjects by a ratio of 2:1 (Sullivan *et al.*, 2010). It is, however, very easy to both overestimate these differences – which often have the appearance of intuitively accepted (rather than empirically verified) notions – and to ignore the fact that, internationally, FM course content follows a broadly similar pattern. In this instance, national variations in emphasis of certain parts of the total curriculum do not constitute a rejection of other elements, but merely an evolutionary preference within the broader subject area.

The notion that FM is a fad is, of course, one that has not escaped the FM academic community. Price’s (2001, pp. 56-57) masterly commentary notes that:

Facility/facilities management (FM) still debates its status as a profession or a market, its current status as a field of academic inquiry and future direction. It is beset by paradoxes,

among them an aspiration to the status of a strategic discipline when most practitioners operate at an operational level in their respective organizations ... [.] an uneasy balance of professional traditions; and different views as to what it is, profession or market sector.

Price (2001) also makes observations reiterated by Grimshaw (2007, p. 411) who qualifies his (earlier quoted) enthusiastic assessment of facilities management adding:

Of course there have been setbacks. FM has been too associated with cost cutting and has largely failed in its attempts to establish any credible model for added value or any direct link between physical facilities and productivity.

One of the most puzzling – to both outsiders and some insiders besides – aspects of the debate over the nature of facilities management is the apparent absence of attempts within the international FM community to seek some meaningful closure of these issues. Certainly, the effort has been made, frequently with great cogency, not least within this journal (for good recent reviews see Chung (2008) and Waheed and Fernie (2009) but also Tay and Ooi (2001) but still, as Chung (2008, p. 501) points out, FM “is facing a serious identity crisis” and “operates in ‘an ever widening and ill-defined sphere of activity’”. The truth of these remarks can be seen in a short survey of those papers that have addressed the topic. Some appear almost as *apologia*, seeking to locate (or perhaps relocate) FM within the framework of mainstream management subjects such as service operations management (McLennan, 2004) or strategic management and project management (Chung, 2008), thus presumably seeking to circumscribe questions of field or disciplinary integrity and respectability/credibility. Others argue that the content and status of facilities management as both an academic endeavour and set of professional practices is best seen pragmatically. Thus Chotipanich (2004) appears to suggest that the scope of FM be determined empirically on a case-by-case basis in organizations where it is applied. Yet others call for “new” disciplines, Then (1999, 2000) suggesting FM should be part of a subject “real estate asset management”. Further variant approaches are in evidence, including those that ignore the question of definition altogether.

Whilst these debates suggest that the definition and content of FM as both a field of study and of practice are beset by doubt and uncertainty the situation is not as dire as it first appears. The apparent unwillingness to resolve issues of definition and content is, albeit slowly, being overtaken by an emerging consensus as to how facilities management can and should develop. It is to this emerging “preferred view” of FM and the issues attendant upon it that discussion now turns.

### 3. To see ourselves as others see us

As Howard’s earlier cited comments suggest, an essential difference between national communities of practice in FM is the relative weight given to the focus upon the physical, constructed assets of an organization, and the relationship of people as employees or other building users to those physical assets. The British Institute of Facilities Management definition quoted by Frapin-Beaugé *et al.* (2008, p. 388) in many ways represents an example of what appears to be an uneasy compromise between “hard” (asset management in terms of physical construction and maintenance) and “soft” FM (managing assets in the light of the needs of the users of such constructions).

Yet, within the literature so far reviewed in this paper there *is* an emerging preferred view of facilities management that falters only on two issues. This is that facilities

management is a more or less coherent management function focusing on how to develop, maintain and improve the physical assets needed to support and add value to an organization's business processes and create and maintain a physical workplace that provides optimal support to the people and work of the organization. FM is multi-disciplinary, facilities managers have to deal with the challenge of integrating principles originating from fields such as business administration, architecture, engineering and social and behavioural sciences. The first issue on which this emerging consensus falters is the question of weight given to different elements in the field. The second issue, which sadly in many ways reinforces the first, is the extent to which reflections on the disciplinary and professional scope of FM have been overtaken by its reputation as being synonymous with cost-cutting through outsourcing.

The perception of FM and FM organizations as supporting devices for organizations seeking to cut costs via outsourcing non-core functions is not entirely undeserved because it is a highly visible and substantial part of FM companies' business and has resulted in many new providers entering the market and rapid growth in the ranges of services offered. A related development to the outsourcing of specific services is the outsourcing of the co-ordination, management, monitoring and evaluation of complete packages of these services. Many FM companies describe themselves as being multi-service providers or offering the "total facilities management" so derided by Howard (2002).

Nevertheless, the perception that facilities management equals outsourcing is just that – a perception – and a highly distorted one at that. This should go without saying but, sadly, it does seem necessary, given the strength of the public association between the two, to take every opportunity to refute the notion. The advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing have been well-rehearsed. One stance has been to argue that the growth of specialized FM companies is a positive development, generating specialized management and service delivery functions as well as new employment opportunities while encouraging and promulgating the professionalization of facilities management. In this view, by outsourcing non-core activities, organizations encourage these non-core activities to themselves become new core activities and functions in a separate and distinct industry sector. At the same time, the growth of these specialized companies suggests (or creates the image of) FM as something that cannot be done "on the side".

The counter to this view is that companies engaged in outsourcing are required to offer such a range of disparate services that most fail to do anything well (indeed, because many FM companies cannot provide the full-range of services required of companies that outsource, they increasingly make use of outsourcing themselves – so-called "fourth party" outsourcing, Hinks, 2007). The employment opportunities FM providers create are often low in skill, poorly paid and lacking in security. In this scenario, FM is a convenient and largely cosmetic label that disguises the provision of diverse miscellaneous or residual functions that organizations do not take seriously. By extrapolation, facilities management *is* thus little more than a synonym for reducing costs via outsourcing.

It is unfortunate that outsourcing has contributed extensively to defining facilities management in the modern age. As Hinks (2007) writes:

In contrast to needs, instead cost prevalence inhibits quality headroom in contemporary FM  
[.] Contractual approaches to measuring and managing workplace (and FM) performance still



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focus on avoiding failure and the compliance with specification as surrogates for value. The FM measurement paradigm still struggles to illuminate differential competitive advantage from FM in business value terms.

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This is a point also made by Price (2001, p. 61) who notes that:

Business relevant outcomes, other than reduced costs, from FM are poorly understood. There is a dearth of conclusive evidence in the literature concerning the impact of property initiatives on organizational productivity. Some attempts have been made to quantify value as risk reduced but, even here, the general evidence is still very limited.

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What is interesting about both writers, and others referenced in this paper also, is the implication, often subtly stated, that FM practice has become defined not only by its focus on cost reduction, but by a self-maintained and restricting supporting, rather than proactive, role within organizations. To break away from this, Price (2001, p. 62) argues that:

The “facilities” manager (whether called by that label or not) must articulate the strategic facilities brief rather than wait for it to be articulated by some other part of an organization. The strategic deliverables from FM, the high-level performance measures used to judge the return on FM expenditure, and the criteria by which FM organizations benchmark themselves will need to be expressed in language that is relevant to the core business in question. As demonstrated above, the language of output measures has so far failed to engender the necessary change; indeed it is debatable whether it will do so. The solution would seem to be considering FM performance in relation to measures of core business success that is outcomes rather than outputs. It is not just that FM practitioners occupy operational levels in their respective organizations. It is also that they, and hence their organizations, judge themselves in operational language.

In endorsing Price’s view it is necessary to enter a caveat, one that returns to the question of the first issue on which the emerging consensus about the nature of FM falters, namely the issue of the weight given to different knowledge specializations in the field, for it is the answer to this question that will commence the process of circumscribing the discipline of facilities management. The alternative is to accept that the “meanings” of facilities management will always be driven by operational imperatives on the “FM is what we do around here” principle – an ultimate pragmatism. This alternative comes with at least one obvious, logical, drawback – it removes any rationale whatsoever for FM education, for what cannot be properly defined, cannot be taught. Similar problems are currently being experienced by other vocational disciplines in higher education, notably hospitality management (Frapin-Beaugé *et al.*, 2008) where a once relatively strong student demand for programmes has weakened, questions have been asked about the disciplinary integrity of the subject and increasingly higher level courses are absorbed into general business management programmes with a “splash” of specialist knowledge of the sector. It is, then, time to establish if there is a potentially viable strategy for bringing facilities management of age.

#### 4. Conclusion

Periodic discussion of a subject’s or discipline’s nature is normal and healthy – never ending discussion and doubt is inclined to invite scorn, lessen credibility and inhibit progression and development of the subject. Unless facilities management

professionals, educators and researchers take the lead in resolving some of the current debates about the nature of FM, the field's uncertainties will continue to generate distrust in the professional and academic worlds until people do come to regard FM as just a temporary historical management fad.

As this paper has sought to demonstrate, to achieve this will not, perhaps, be as difficult a problem as has hitherto been presented. Although still somewhat hazy, there is an emerging consensus of FM as potentially central to organizations' core business processes. That this idea has not, perhaps, been sold very effectively may in part be due to the varying national FM practices identified earlier. However, none of these variations in emphasis as to the substance of FM suggest intrinsic incompatibility but rather a lack of "fit" between the FM profession and FM educators in institutions of higher education. For the latter, reformulating existing definitional approaches to FM in order to conceptualize a "broader" field that reflects the experience of professionals operating in different disciplinary and national traditions is, in reality, unproblematic and confers the advantage of establishing the "range" of the discipline, illuminating the fact that though many FM organizations deal with the management of outsourced services, the scope and potential of FM is much wider. Thus, though FM "as" outsourcing is the "bread and butter" of many FM professionals, it is but one element amongst others in the field as a whole and it is to the "whole" that FM as a profession and field of intellectual enquiry must look in order to rebalance its current cost-focused reputation as soon as possible, demonstrating (in the manner recommended by Price, 2001, and Hinks, 2007 noted earlier) the undoubted potential of FM in contributing to wider business outcomes. This is in the interests of all those who see the vibrant possibilities of a professional, intellectually coherent FM and wish to ensure that the holistic opportunities of FM are not lost, but regained.

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