

REIMAGINE, REALIGN, RECONNECT: WHAT ROLE DOES FACILITIES MANAGEMENT PLAY?

Has there always been a tendency towards the under-appreciation of facilities managers (FM)? Many industry observers certainly think so, and there is a general feeling that this lack of recognition rests primarily with executive-level managers within an organisation – often referred to collectively as the C-suite.

19 июня 2020 г.

In her August 2019 article, Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management CEO Linda Hausmanis (1) argued that “historically the C-suite has underestimated the impact workplace and facilities management can have, and perhaps FMs have been too shy about promoting themselves and their profession. But the time has come for finance and HR directors, and everyone else around the boardroom table, to seize the not-so-marginal gains facilities management offers.”

The observations in this article, written before Covid-19, surely apply even more intensely as we adjust to the New Normal. With many employers currently planning their return to work, they would do well to heed the all-encompassing implications of the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) definition of facilities management as “a profession that encompasses multiple disciplines to ensure functionality, comfort, safety and efficiency of the built environment by integrating people, place, process and technology” (2).

“An important lesson these past months taught us, is that there will be no excuse for undervaluing the importance of facilities managers in achieving – and maintaining – healthy workplaces”, says Priva Building Automation’s VP strategy and commerce, Peter Vandendriessche.

Although the precise roll-call of responsibilities will obviously vary between organisations, FM’s core competencies typically include the selection and management of technology, quality assessment, environmental stewardship and sustainability, and – something that surely no company will underestimate ever again! – preparation for emergencies and business continuity. The IFMA also points to increased automation and the Internet of Things as being a few of the more recent developments that herald additional workload for FMs.

In this context, it makes sense to think of the FM as a fundamental pivot around which the entire day-to-day activity of an organisation rotates. Sadly, our interaction with FMs over the years has confirmed that, all too often, they feel sorely undervalued by their employers. Instead of being regarded as crucial enablers of effective workplaces, they may be perceived as providing a support function only. Unfortunately, this tends to mean that they are not always brought into vital decision-making processes at a sufficient early stage. They are also not always allocated sufficient resources to ensure that building infrastructures remain fit for purpose.

“I’ve been with Priva for over 30 years. Over time, I’ve seen the company grow and evolve. At Priva, we have always considered health and comfort of employees important. But I am happy to see that in recent years overall awareness for employee wellbeing and facilities management has increased. I think this trend will continue in the future”, explains Ruud Hulleman, Technical Facility Manager Priva Campus, De Lier.

The recent crisis obliges employers to think more rigorously about how their buildings operate. This should mean that FMs will be valued more highly in the future. It should also signal greater engagement with C-suite personnel to voice their concerns or recommendations to improve workplace wellbeing. Nevertheless, the full implications for employers and building operators are still becoming clear. What seems certain is that there is a good chance that this evolving picture will mean additional responsibilities for FMs. It is difficult to envisage them not playing a central role in any future schemes that involve workplaces being rated on their 'crisis fitness' in a manner that parallels existing building performance assessments.

This combination of factors means that there has never been a better opportunity for businesses to ensure that FMs are at the heart of their decision-making processes.

And, as Hausmanis implies in her article, FMs themselves shouldn't refrain from asserting the value of their contribution!

Source:

(1) Facilities Management Journal, August 2019:

<https://www.fmj.co.uk/magazines/fmjaugust2019ebook.pdf>

(2) <https://www.ifma.org/about/what-is-facility-management>

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