

The F Word - Why Facilities Matter

By Martin Pickard

Leaders of businesses and organisations don't want to talk about Facilities. It's a dirty word associated with cleaning, maintenance and other “non-core” activities. The common view seems to be that facility managers should be neither seen nor heard. In this series of articles originally published in PFM Magazine Martin Pickard highlights six reasons why this should not be the case. Each article provides sound arguments demonstrating the contribution that good facilities management can make to assist the achievement of organisational goals.

This month the focus is on the FM contribution to workplace productivity.

You know it makes sense

People feel better in a nice working environment and people who are feeling good are likely to be more productive. That is so obvious that this article hardly seems necessary. However, in budget meetings and financial reviews up and down the land facility managers have to justify every penny being grudgingly spent on maintaining the sheer basics in the workplace let alone discussing investment in the creation of a more productive workplace.

It is easy to instinctively understand that a few nice plants in the office will make it a nicer place to be and that people will feel and work better as a result. However when your Finance Director wants to know why you are wasting thousands of pounds every year on caring for a few plants it is difficult to effectively demonstrate the bottom line return on such an investment.

For this reason it seems, many of the exemplar case studies have been driven by value systems rather than business cases. If senior management, and often this means one influential leader, truly believes that good morale and a positive team spirit is good for business then they can make it happen and the facility manager will find themselves with a powerful sponsor.

In other organisations the FM may find themselves tackling this challenge alone. But if they are successful and properly measure and quantify their efforts and results they will soon attract the attention of those whose support is required to accelerate the initiative.

About Productivity

Most definitions of Productivity refer to the relationship between inputs and outputs. In manufacturing environments this is easy to observe, it takes so much material and so many hours to produce one widget and initiatives that reduce the material needed or speed up the process thereby increase productivity.

In an office environment it is relatively easy to measure the inputs – energy, rent, wages etc. but it can be very difficult to capture the outputs in a meaningful way. The fact that it is easy to focus on cost probably explains why we do so much of it. However, as is so often the case, there is much to be gained by exploring the road less travelled. There are two principal thrusts to any productivity oriented FM initiative – the identification and removal of disruptive workplace factors that increase the inputs required beyond the basic work content and the creation of productivity enhancing interventions that accelerate output. See Diagram

Productivity blockers

There are many workplace related factors that add cost and time to the input side of workplace productivity. These range from the cumulative effect of time spent walking to and waiting at printers, copiers and fax machines to the more pernicious impact of poor health and safety. Here are a few tactics that might be employed by a facility manager intent on reducing wasted productivity.

- Review the positioning and numbers of printers, copiers and faxes. Most equipment is now intelligent enough to allow scrutiny of usage data. Are some machines attracting heavier traffic leading to queuing?
- If user data is accessible try plotting the machines footprint on your CAD layout. Could the footprint be reduced by relocation thus optimising the users time?
- How many productive hours are being lost due to workplace related accidents? Can you increase your safety training and awareness activities
- Are your DSE workstation assessments thorough enough? The most likely area of productivity impact is discomfort through poor light or glare, excessive heat or cold, too much air movement, distracting noise, uncomfortable or unsuitable furniture etc.
- Is your maintenance regime bringing work to a standstill? The additional cost of rescheduling work out of hours may be outweighed by the productivity impact. Consider shifting to reactive or condition based maintenance instead of a planned prevention programme
- Are you losing productive time as a result of power failure or loss of building services? The overall cost of failure to the business may far exceed the cost of generators, batteries or new equipment.
- Examine the mean time between failure (MTBF) statistics for office equipment and lifts. Is your maintenance regime being effective? Can you improve service reliability?
- Are your support service processes efficient from the users perspective? How long do they have to wait for a response from your help desk? Can they log faults online and monitor progress in real time? How many forms are required to carry out normal everyday functions? Perhaps some process analysis is in required.
- The perception of insecurity can be highly distracting. Nobody wants to work behind bars but a well planned and efficient security regime integrating electronic and physical measures can be enormously reassuring

- Are human needs like privacy and social interaction catered for in your workplace design? Everyone needs an element of both. Your office plan should cater for different kinds of work activity and individual variances. Lack of privacy is frequently quoted as a negative factor in poorly designed open plan offices
- What about sick absence? Are your building services spreading infection? Do you have any hygiene problems in your catering set up or facilities?
- How much time is wasted travelling between sites? Could video or audio conferencing reduce this or should you be considering physical relocation of some functions?

Productivity enhancement

The creation of workspaces that enhance individual and team productivity was one of the key drivers behind the creation of the facilities management movement in the 1970s when furniture company Herman Miller began working with academics and major customers on the creation of radical new office landscapes.

In the UK the BIFMs Office of the Year competition maintained that focus on design for many years and several of the new Excellence Awards cover the same issues but have been expanded to recognise the equally important impact of support services in the workplace. Strategies which can be employed as part of a drive to enhance productivity might include:

- The general aesthetics of the office environment can have a dramatic impact upon the perception of the occupants. Good use of colour, internal planting and the positioning of artwork has been a key feature of award winning projects in recent years. Research by IAC Ltd reports “an increasing recognition of art as an integral part of a motivating and productive working environment, and that more organisations are actively seeking to maximise the benefits of art within the context of their broader business philosophy.”
- Improved communication between colleagues, suppliers and customers is one of the most important issues to be considered. The office is the centre of social interaction and the design and provision of better meeting rooms, open spaces and telecommunication facilities demands serious attention.
- The actual design philosophy of the building can have a big impact and the choice between cellular or open plan, distributed or centralised services or any of the myriad other choices available must be well thought out.
- The stacking plans for the building are equally important. An efficient office layout will take careful note of operational adjacencies to optimise the use of assets and functions in use.
- There is now considerable evidence concerning the benefits to be gained from fresh air and natural ventilation. Absenteeism rates have been shown to be reduced by as much as 6% in naturally-ventilated buildings. Productivity gains have also been shown in buildings where

there is a greater access to natural daylight (and those, such as in Norway where artificial daylight has been incorporated).

- All people respond very positively to recognition of their individuality and self worth. The facility manager can do much to support such an approach developing bespoke and intelligent service solutions that treat people as individuals and with due respect.
- The trend towards greater personal control over an individuals environment takes this approach one step further and is increasingly being incorporated into “green” building design with significant impact upon the perceived morale of building occupants
- The creation of a social community within the workplace can be greatly enhanced by the design and provision of catering, welfare and sporting facilities.
- A focus away from “Sickness management” and towards “Wellness support” must have a positive impact on productivity. Massage services, dietary advice and dental care in the workplace are not just valued benefits but will reduce sick absence and increase staff retention while improving the performance of the human asset itself.

The FM Contribution

These weighty action plans clearly demonstrate that there is much that the smart facility manager can do to improve productivity in the workplace. The difficulty remains of our inability to adequately measure the impact of our labours and thus justify the investment required.

The Office Productivity Network (OPN) www.officeproductivity.co.uk has been addressing this challenge for many years. The OPN provides a network to enable the exchange of information and best practice and to campaign for the greater appreciation of the importance of office environments to business productivity.

They have developed a very effective Occupancy Evaluation survey process to assess workers perception of office productivity along with an interview based process to allow benchmarking between buildings on key design features. These initiatives are to be applauded but require much wider application if we are to generate substantive data in support of future business cases.

For the foreseeable future facility managers will continue to battle with an uncomfortable image as a cost focussed, low value management discipline. Despite this handicap our profession continues to progress towards a more valued strategic position in organisational terms.

Well designed and properly managed facilities do support the businesses they serve. The best facility managers go further and contribute towards strategic business goals in many ways including the aspects of talent, compliance, efficiency, reputation, risk and productivity that have been addressed in this series of articles. The future lies with them.

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