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► Paving the path for new managers

By Megha S Anthony

Growth in the facilities management sector is evident. Over the last few years, the sector has gained prominence and people are starting to realize how integral the role of FM is to a building. Though every year, the way people from the industry perceive the profession is different. Cognizant that the facilities management industry is vastly a people-oriented and service-intense, 'FM today' only found it apt to ask FM Managers from across the region, with varying number of years of experience in their stride, on their perspective on the industry, the challenges they face on the job and most importantly what made them take up the role of an FM manager.



Shannon Laverty, Manager, Cannon Hygiene

Having been in the industry for ten years, Ahmad I Abu Shawish, Facility Manager, United Facilities Management, Kuwait, has been a witness to major development projects in Kuwait in the capacity of construction project management. "During this period, I realized how crucial facility management is to the success of any built environment. This was evident to me during the commission periods, where the need for a strong facility manager is so pivotal in order to ensure proper continuity of information flow between contractors and the support teams," he said.

For Shannon Laverty, Manager for Cannon Hygiene, an in-house brand of OCS Group, the FM industry was very new to her. "Coming from Australia, with a sales background; it's obvious to my colleagues that I am a 'deal with customers face to face on a daily basis' kind of business woman. The market is fresh, the clientele are establishing themselves and the FM industry, in particular Cannon Hygiene, caters to my passion for exactly that, dealing with customers whilst delivering a five star service," she said. Shannon went on to add, "Although new to the Middle East FM industry (first year), the OCS and the Cannon Hygiene team have well-versed knowledge across the FM business which allows me to provide a wide range of expertise to my clientele."

With nearly 20 years of experience in the FM industry, Paul Raffety, FM Operations Manager, Interserve,

said that his interest in the FM industry developed whilst serving an apprenticeship as an electrical engineer with a UK based Property Management Company. "It was during this time that I gained an interest and understanding on the beneficial impacts of facilities management to both people and places," he added.

Challenges

Facility managers are in the forefront representing the well-being of the built environment to all involved stakeholders from tenants and visitors to owners and the community, in general. Hence, the facility manager faces challenges on an hourly basis. In fact, it was the challenges in the industry that fascinated Subramanya Rao, General Manager, FM division, Al-Futtaim Engineering, about the FM industry nearly two decades ago. "Even during the recession the opportunities and growth in this sector were endless. Moreover, having a unique experience specific to the FM industry is always an advantage," he added.

A key challenge for any facility manager is to formulate a balance between addressing immediate needs and fulfilment of long-term strategic projects. "The success of any facility manager is his or her ability to implement a 360-degree view of the built environment while ensuring mundane tasks are performed as planned and at the appropriate time. But perhaps the most challenging

aspect of being a facility manager in the region still remains in the lack of awareness about the role of FM in the built environment and that is something that the FM industry as a whole ought to continue addressing," said Ahmad.

Being fairly new to the industry and the region, Shannon says, that one of the first challenges she faced was a cultural one. "Firstly, coming from 21 years in Australia, with not a wide range of knowledge of the Middle Eastern culture at times proves quite difficult, however, this is one of the main challenges I particularly enjoy, I have learnt a lot more in the last few months than I could have imagined. I'm now learning to speak, read and also write Arabic, I find myself asking questions and seeking answers all day, every day," she said and went on to add, "Secondly, as you know Cannon Hygiene is a service provider offering full washroom services, one particular product, new to the market in the Middle East, is our Feminine Hygiene Unit. Given the low knowledge of this product in the Middle East, it is obviously a challenge in pushing the product through that barrier, and being able to get across the importance of these units on a day-to-day basis. However, the product honestly speaks for itself and is quickly spreading across the city, with a list of clients to boast about."

Subramanya goes on to note that the FM industry has gone through a huge change these years and challenges like technological change, retention of talent and management of old equipment and properties are some of the challenges that he faces now. "Technological change has revolutionized this industry. Customers are being offered different solutions by various companies, which confuse them. In the end, they don't get the promised output. Al-Futtaim Engineering provides complete turnkey energy efficient solutions which add value to the clients. Second issue is the retention of talent. Through technical training, we always keep our technicians or supervisors up-to-date with the latest technologies and know-how's in the market. However, once technicians are trained and have experience, it

is hard to retain them, to overcome this we have awards, schemes and other motivational programs. Thirdly, management of old equipment and properties. There are many properties in the emirates which are very old and are outdated. Our clients have very high expectation on service quality which they want to attain at lower cost. We deal with this situation by advising the client on upgrading the assets with energy-efficient solutions and reducing our operating cost," he added.



Paul Raffety, FM Operations Manager, Interserve

Paul too faced similar challenges like Subramanya. But how he overcomes his challenges are different. One of the challenges he faced are in staff or operative training and communication. "We have developed bespoke trade specific training packages including technical, communication and life skills training and assessment, the training plans are linked to their grades, which encourages the operatives to engage with the training plans as it is the key to their advancement and our succession plans," he explained.

Another major challenge he faced is in delivering high-quality services across a wide portfolio of clients and properties. "We have developed a standardized Integrated Operations System and CAFM which is tailored to suit each individual client and location, our client is engaged with

key documents on our contracts to ensure that our service delivery is aligned with our client and end user requirements," he stated.

Need of the hour in FM

Growth in the industry is one aspect everyone is not only aware of but is also experiencing it first-hand. Subramanya says that while there is a lot of potential when it comes to the growth of the industry, it is equally important that customers understand the importance of increasing the longevity of the assets. "FM is not limited to cleaning, landscaping, etc. as it was years ago. In today's date FM can also run your operations at close to 100 per cent efficiency at minimal cost and providing energy efficient solutions," he noted.

Paul believes that the FM industry is developing in the MENA region at a very fast pace and shall be a world leader in the next five years. "It is apparent that our clients are becoming more aware of the FM industry and its benefits. The FM industry shall need to continue to develop and adapt to meet our clients future needs, energy management and water conservation are key areas of concern for our clients hence facility management companies need to continue to develop solutions to meet our client's needs," he added.

In Doha too, Shannon has observed the boom in the industry and to her the need of the hour is a cost effective 5-star service. "The rapid growth of this industry thrills me. Both OCS and Cannon Hygiene bring standards and once you look at the reality of the standards here, it's hard not to say, that our deliverables of high-class services are much higher of that of our competitors. Customers need a cost effective 5-star service which is maintained through reliability and rapport," she said.

Ahmad, on the other hand, has noticed over the last ten years, a sense of urgency among developers to give FM a high priority within the scope of work of their projects. "This is due to the fact that the average size of construction projects in Kuwait has tremendously increased and we are seeing multi-functional

built environment being constructed, high-rise iconic towers and large government campuses. With such projects, the need for FM becomes an essential necessity that cannot be omitted. I believe, with all these mega projects being released to the market, the need of the hour in the FM industry is getting closer. After all, someone has to manage all these complex buildings and the traditional methods do not scale to address such complexities," he added.

Rise in demand

Clearly, the facility management discipline is on the rise in the Middle East region. This is due to the real estate boom that left a large inventory of facilities to be maintained, serviced and managed. When asked why one would recommend FM as a career, Paul said, "FM provides a very challenging and rewarding career, where you can have a positive impact on people's lives, learn new skills and experiences every day, whilst having good earning potential and lifestyle."

With more and more youngsters



Subramanya Rao, General Manager, FM division, Al-Futtaim Engineering

entering the market, the opportunities are only increasing. "Eight per cent of the FM industry is aged 35 and below, the opportunities for my generation

are endless. The leading patriarchs of the industry have a responsibility to further educate and develop our skills in order to further success the industry," said Shannon.

UFM has been active in promoting FM to future generations by engaging educational institutions through awareness and training programs. "I believe it is a great discipline that combines many skills and provide the opportunity to address technical, business, operational and customer support issues in under one umbrella. This is a unique aspect of FM, the ability to interface with tenants, engineers and technicians and at the same time keep within a strategic and business framework. I believe this aspect is quite rewarding for students who are on the look for an engaging career," Ahmad said.

While Subramanya further explained, "FM is a dynamic industry and it provides many opportunities to everyone at all levels. Moving forward, I see the industry in more demand than ever." ■



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