People make, and patterns break, FM

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People make, and patterns break, FM

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ABSTRACT

Purpose, Reports a service ecosystem in FM as a basis for understanding peoples' roles

Theory, The service ecosystem model

Design/methodology/approach, Interpretive, but realistic, qualitative research into perceptions of FM excellence

Findings, The importance of perceptions and narratives in shaping FM services.

Originality/value, Presents the first mapped example of a service ecosystem and shows how it can be used in practice.

KEYWORDS Facilities; Service ecosystem, people management, service excellence

1   INTRODUCTION

FM has quarrelled about what it is since 1978 but has become both global and the foundation of a large business sector (Price, 2012a; 2012b). FM services tend to be labour intensive, to be tied to the location of particular buildings (i.e. impossible to offshore) and to be delivered by operatives who are frequently paid minimal wages. Many are economic migrants. Yet they are arguably the fee earners of the sector. Their delivery or otherwise of service operates under a complex web of interactions mediated by formal contracts but more importantly informal relationships.

In 2013 we interviewed 12 of the most senior client side individuals responsible for the day to day management of FM that we could reach. Where possible we also spoke to service users. The results (Price & McCarroll, 2013; Thompson & Price, 2014) showed peoples' understanding of excellence – either as what Johnston 2004 termed 'easy to do business with' or as opulence – hugely framed their approach to FM and even their perceptions of the value their organizations did, or did not derive from it.

In 2014/15 we have extended the project to interview 12 suppliers at account manager, regional director or business unit director levels. Mapping the relationships described by interviewees revealed the web of relationships (Coenen, Kok & Alexander, 2013) or value network as a service ecosystem (Vargo & Lusch, 2011, Vargo Wieland & Akaka, 2015; Storbacka & Nenonen 2015). Indeed the data suggest a number of relationship interfaces at which a particular ecosystem can arrive either at a virtuous service partnership with perceived benefits or a destructive cycle of recrimination and value destruction[1]. Patterns (sensu Price and Akhlaghi, 1999) appear to explain the difference.

2   HISTORICAL CONTEXT

FM has come to be seen as, and labelled by its providers, as 'none core'. There are signs of change particularly at the large end of the sector where clients are revising expectations and suppliers are increasingly seeking to project special, value adding knowledge and competencies. Service expectations of FM may even be beginning to return the subject to the classic new workplaces of the two Franks; Becker and Duffy.

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[1] At the time of writing to meet publication deadlines the coding of the 24 plus hours of interview data is still in progress. Detailed results will be presented in the Service Excellence Workshop

It was pre-eminently the second of these two who brought the discipline to Europe founding *Facilities* in 1983 as his company's[2] in house publication. The first EUROFM research conference in 1990 saw it transfer to MCB Press with Keith Alexander as consulting editor. Isolated voices even then cried out for 'people', for example Ellis (1991 8 emphasis added).

> *My own view, and the theme of this article, is that many office planners and managers have lost their sense of what it is that people who work in offices are there for, and the kind of contribution they could, would and should make to the facilities management process.*
>
> *We have become progressively transfixed by the hardware of the office; dazzled by the technology. There was once a time when an office was a human function exercised by an individual, an "officer". Now we define offices in terms of space, furniture and technology, and we have "users", a term which has denigrated the exercisers of offices into rather passive functionaries whose physical control over the systems that they use is often limited to "personalisation", a marginal function if ever there was one. Allied to this is the concept of facilities management as an expert technical function which takes the management of the physical workplace right out of the hands of the person who occupies it.*

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The same logic (c.f. Donald, 1994), allied to utilization surveys and control systems still pervades today's FM discourse despite case evidence showing greater user, company and social benefit of a different approach (Price 2007, 2011; Stuart, 2012). Ample evidence points to process as a key determinant of the success or otherwise of newer designs (La Framboise et al., 2003; Price 2007, Price & Fortune, 2008; Bull & Brown, 2012; Bull & Kortens, 2012; Aarto; 2014) but it is still routine to see academic investigations of workplaces that ignore the process element (e,g, this volume)

There were other early cries for people as FM broadened into service provision and outsourcing. In the archives of *Facilities* the oldest reference to "service level agreements" is, unsurprisingly, Keith Alexander's (1992 13 emphasis added).

> *The key issue in facilities management is the specification and delivery of service quality. It is easy to distinguish between facilities properly managed and ordinary support services. The final test of true service quality is user satisfaction — **would the user actually choose to buy the services provided, if he or she were free to obtain services elsewhere?***
>
> *Facilities management plays a pivotal role between demand and supply. On behalf of the organization the team have the responsibility for creating policy and setting standards. On the one hand, **service level agreements should be negotiated with users.** These individual and group demands must be reconciled with the needs of the organization.*

Fast forward 25 years and unfortunately the writing and monitoring of the ubiquitous SLAs has become a cottage industry of its own. FM practice and perhaps FM research has lost touch with the users and what they are there to do, or what – in cases such as schools and pupils– (Price et al., 2009) or universities (Kok, Mobach & Ompta, 2015) the facility is there to do for them.

With few exceptions (e.g. catering if a) it was not subsidized in house and b) convenient competitors could not be excluded[3]) facilities services did not actually compete for direct user spend. With few exceptions (experience businesses such as hospitality where the physical environment was experienced by the external user) facilities were not seen as part of the customer experience. FM contracts for outsourced provision frequently ignored the end user or even the staff experience within the 'core'[4] business.

The emerging business of FM did not have - and contra the academics and institutes did not see itself needing (Green & Price, 2001) – professional standards akin to traditional professional service business. The procurement models for the new world of FM contracts drew either on developments of the US Defence Department's Planned Programming and Budgeting System;

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[2] DEGW

[3] Try for example introducing external catering into a meeting organised in a university facility. Health and Safety is the first reason offered why you cannot do it.

[4] A term that self-defined FM. Business critical examples (Price 2004) aspects of FM are still hard to find.

itself a derivative of 1920s Taylorism (Pratt, 1994) or the bills of quantities beloved of surveyors as schedules attached to construction contracts.

Tranfield and Akhlaghi (1995) sought to alert FM to the fact that manufacturing companies – those who were surviving – had moved beyond such simple mechanistic approaches to management and measurement of performance. They argued (based on research by Tranfield and colleagues) that leading manufacturers were operating via (9 emphasis added):

> … *mechanisms of mutual adjustment, standardization of inputs and shared purpose. Each of these is **mediated directly through the social system in general and the individual in particular**, and all require a constant attention to the action reflection-learning dimension. It is these ideas of designing organizations to produce emergent structures rather than co-ordinating through the command hierarchy (see Figure 5) that are providing a first understanding of the key benchmarking features which can assure sustained performance improvement not only in the short run but also, by continual revision, in the medium to long term too.*

Price arrived in FM in the early 1990s from a period spent benchmarking organisational transformation, influenced by Pascale's (1991) conception of management as the making and breaking of paradigms, in the search for organisational transformation. Unfortunately, as Pascale put it, "we are devoting our efforts to squeezing more and more out of the existing paradigm ... it's killing us". Tranfield's work, and similar studies of either resurgent manufacturing or the success of foreign owned companies in industries such as UK motor manufacturing arguably showed the decline of the existing paradigm, where the pressure to change was greatest, Price and Akhlaghi, (1999) identified two broad paradigms operating in FM; akin to Macgregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y (Table 1). Bowers and Aklaghi (1999) drew on the study when they highlighted the potential for "modern HRM practices" creating genuine teams across contractual boundaries as a means to significant enhancement of service provision.

Topic	Control paradigm	Learning paradigm
1 Basic stance towards FM	FM is a cost centre, from which top management have to cut expenditure	**FM and the organisation's serviced environment are seen as an integral part of the strategy of the organisation**
2 Organisation	Organisations tend to be highly functional with a centralised manager responsible for staff in many locations	**FM personnel are integrated into multifunctional work teams with a shared emphasis on the external customer**
3 Choice of FM provision	Made by rigorous reliance on formal procurement and compulsory competitive tendering	**Emphasis placed in the first instance on relationship with "open book negotiation of a provision contract**
4 Focus of improvement initiatives	Internal costs and systems	**External relationships with both suppliers and users**
5 "Customer" "Provider" relationship	Tendency to assume that if it is not formally specified it will not be done Much informal negotiation	**Providers more concerned with receivers/customers (the two terms are not synonymous). What can be done will be done**
6 Attitude to staff, especially the lower paid	Top-down definition of jobs and standards. Systems such as time recording are there to control	**Encouragement of highest standards possible with available resources. Systems seen as there to generate information which helps**
7 Multi-skilling	Either not attempted, or imposed with the clear objective of reducing costs by up-skilling lower paid to do more	**Treated as a development exercise to enhance self-esteem and motivation**
8 Service level agreements and contracts	Lengthy and detailed with an emphasis on costs. Operate in practice as "the best you will get without paying more"	**Focus on outputs. Operate in practice as "the minimum you can expect from a given resource level"**
9 Help desk systems and other work allocation processes	Designed from the perspective that they are there to control work allocation	**Designed from the perspective of enabling speedier response times and less waste of resources**
10 Space design	**Focuses on density of occupation and utilisation**	**Focuses on optimising output and internal communication**

Table 1. Price and Akhlaghi's (1999) comparison of FM paradigms. Examples in the original

In practice applications of the learning approach were rare, and even threatened. In 1997 a White Paper by the UK's then new left of centre government committed to general surveys of public expectations of the National Health Service (NHS). The first such survey, in 1998, revealed public expectations of cleanliness and food that surprised the then government. The service nominated one of the inspirations for our learning paradigm to spend 90 minutes in the Prime Minister's office explaining why this result should not be a surprise. Two years later, when a Chief Executive wedded to a more traditional management pattern took over after two trusts merged that individual did not retain their post in the revised management structure. The dominant logic of FM was firmly rooted in the control paradigm.

Another outcome of the survey was political action to establish Patient Environment Asseessment Teams (PEAT inspections as they became known)[5]. In 2007 Rachel Macdonald found aspects of the learning pattern as the single common factor in the few hospital trusts that scored consistently excellent results at all their sites in the first four rounds of PEAT (Macdonald, 2012). In one of her cases the approach (qua Bowers and Akhlaghi, op cit.) extended across contractual boundaries. The people orientated approach to FM appeared to produce better environments for staff and patients. Unfortunately it was the exception, and some of the individuals who Rachel interviewed even admitted to keeping their heads down out of fear of criticism.

Twenty years ago (Price 1995) argued that innovation is easier in populations isolated from the dominant paradigms (we might now say dominant logics) of companies or institutions. Just as in biological evolution new species emerge in peripheral isolates – small populations not exposed to the damping norms of a species' DNA – so in organisations something similar happens. Rachel's examples are a case in point. They were one inspiration for the argument made to EuroFM (Price, Ellison & Macdonald, 2009) that FM should "*engage not with elaborate structural functional models of building service supply but with the socially constructed realities of organisations and their results*". Our service excellence research provided an opportunity to examine such constructs in practice.

3   METHODOLOGY

Our methodology adapted a pragmatic discovery first published by Peter Scott-Morgan (1994) that if you encourage people to talk openly about their environment, listen intently and say as little as possible then you get insights. Some would call it a realist ethnography and we have described the detail elsewhere (Suckley, Price and Sharpe, 2013; Price, 2014; Price et al., 2015), In brief we conducted 12 client (Table 2) and 12 supplier (Table 3) interviews and where permitted facility visits and discussions with users.

Informed especially by Johnston (2004) we first asked interviewees to recollect an instance where they recalled receiving excellent service as individuals. The question was a natural trigger for their understanding of excellence and views as to whether it could, or should, transfer to facilities services and what might enable, or impede such a transfer. From there the discussion flowed as a conversation, with the 2nd interviewer / observer mentally checking that every item on a list had been covered, and listening for points to clarify.

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[5] Another, as I discovered when checking for the date of the original survey was the growth of NHS surveys. See http://www.nhssurveys.org/.

4   SUMMARY OF RESULTS

4.1   The FM Ecosystem

	Description	Principal interviewees	Nature of visit
C1	Acute Hospital	Assistant Director FM	Interview and tour of projects enhancing the patient environment
C2	International professional service firm	Head of FM for UK	Interview in a 'client side' meeting room and tour 'staff-side'
C3	Mobile phone operator	Head of FM Operations UK	Interview in a 'staff side' meeting room including 2 staff and site tour
C4	UK owned i bank	FM Procurement specialist	Interview in staff side catering facility and tour.
C5	International professional service firm	Director Operations UK	Interview in a 'client side' meeting room.
C6	Local authority	Contract Manager and FM Contract Manager	Interview in a former office. Visit to three schools
C7	US owned technology company	Head of Property and FM UK and Ireland	Interview in a 'staff side' meeting room and tour
C8	European owned bank	Head of Client Services UKMEA	Interview in attached fitness facility
C9	European owned bank	Head of FM UK	Interview in a 'staff side' meeting room
C10	British military	FM for 6 bases in the area	Interview in a 'staff side' meeting room and visit to one mess
C11	Operator of an international airport	FM Manager for a terminal	Interview in a 'staff side' meeting room
C12	Manufacturer of luxury cars	Engineering contracts manager and manager of a waste management contract.	Interview in canteen and the customer tour

Table 2. Scope of Client interviews.

	Organisation	Interviewee
S1	International	Account Director
S2	International	Account Director
S3	International	Account Director
SN	International	Service Dev. Director
S5	National	Account Director
S6t	International	Business Unit Director
S7	LANDLORD	Head of Property
S8	International	Business Unit Director
S9	International	Business Dev. Director
S10	National	Regional Director/ director
S11	National	Regional Director
S12	National	.Account Manager

Table 3. Scope of Client interviews

As we mapped the position of the various interviewees on the supplier client axis and by approximate position in the management hierarchy of their organization it became clear that we were looking at the complex web of relationships (Coenen, Kok and Alexander, 2013) or a distribution akin to the set of relationships Vargo and Lusch (op cit) hypothesize as a service ecosystem[6] (Figure 1).

At the time of writing – dictated by conference deadlines - detailed analysis is still ongoing. Word counts also limit the evidence we can present here. What follows are intitial observations.

4.2   Individual interpretations of excellence
I think people think that service excellence means that it's going to cost a lot more money. **S5**

Consistent with Johnston's (op cit) findings there were two dominant views of individual excellence. Some responses (C3, 7, 9 & 12) explicitly equated it with opulence. Others saw it as

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[6] Although we have not seen one sketched out so explicitly

an experience of the unexpected. Suppliers all leant to the latter view though S1 & S10 did have it added to expensive products.
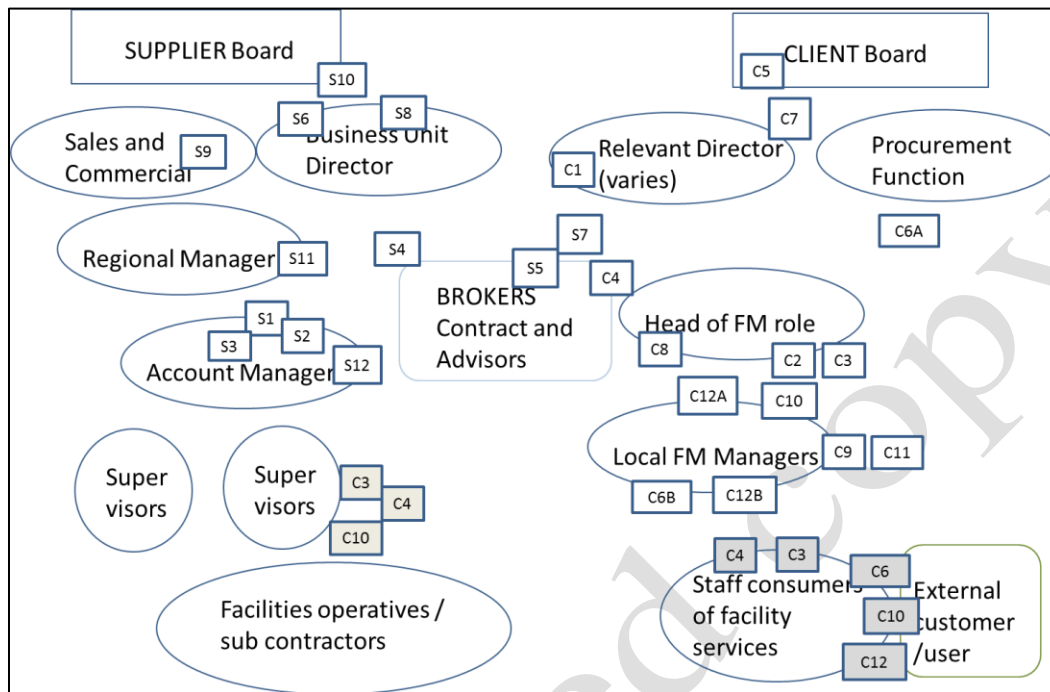

Figure 1. Scope of project interviews. Numbers refer to Tables 2 and 3. Where two client people participated in an interview they are shown as A and B. At C6 and C12 we were given some insight into the external user experience. At C3, C4 and C10 Local service provider staff helped us appreciate the internal user experience.

Peoples' definitions were reflected in their views of application in FM. The **excellence as opulence** group felt that excellence could not, or should not, be transferred to FM (save on points that served the high worth customer). They would not aspire to – or want to be seen aspiring to – excellence "in the current climate" where it has gone[7] "even for directors". In contrast, the **excellence as experience** clients saw it as something to aspire to and work for. A number related the benefits to their 'businesses' of so doing[8]. Suppliers, especially perhaps in less senior positions, saw the experiential excellence as transferable but difficult in the face of hostile, cost focused KPIs, SLAs and micro-management micro management.

4.3   Excellence anyway
They even bought me a box of chocolate when I had my baby. **User C3 on suppliers help desk**

In one interview in particular (C3) we were given an opportunity to discuss perceptions with two users. Both had administrative roles and were frequent callers on the help desk. They spoke of excellence as experience and provided examples of receiving it, to the extent that the main interviewer began to reflect on their own view of excellence. We heard the same in C4, where excellence was being procured for and saw it in operation at C6 and C10. S2, whose client was committed to excellence, gave us other examples. Whether it is the help desk or staff as

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7 One interviewee provided an example where it is only now going

8 We cannot supply confidential examples or identify individuals but this was not, generally, a split between affluent and constrained or private and public sectors

housekeepers / floor captains[9] who know and liase with their key customers the people dimension is clear. Most of the suppliers made the point. At the time of writing we are analysing the detail of the debate as to innate or trainable / empowerable capabilities for such service delivery but the people orientation (c.f. Table 1) is very clear.

4.4   Relationship Management and Brokering

So one of the things that I've been doing is having workshops with the teams and the workshops have focused on talking to them about what we as a business are doing, so helping them to understand what [FIRM] as a business is trying to achieve and why. I think it's also about the way in which you negotiate a contract with your FM company and the relationship that you have with that FM company. **S7**

Unsurprisingly relationship management is a dominant theme of many supplier and some client themes. S4 had recently moved to a supplier as a virtual relationship broker. S5 and S7 had moved the other way and provided graphic examples of working to improve perceptions between suppliers and businesses as did C4 working as a procurement consultant. C6B networked the supplier of cleaning service with local schools. C1 spoke of his role translating between patients clinical staff and especially soft FM providers. In essence all seemed to be acting as 'brokers' who brought people together; *Tertius Iungens*, the third who joins as Obsfelt (2005) put it.

By contrast many suppliers spoke of the opposite, procurement departments and consultants who kept different parties at arm's length; The classic *Tertius gaudens* stance of a broker who benefits by keeping parties apart. Reportedly the presence of particular individuals on tender requests has become a criterion of no-bid for certain suppliers (e.g. S6 and S9). The excellence is opulence individuals in the client interviews were more disposed to separation of procurement.

A critical link in the relationship chain are the regional directors, sometimes known as relationship managers, with responsibility for a portfolio of accounts. Some director level interviwees spoke of recognising such criticality and finding mechanisms to encourage sharing of innovations. We did however find the relationship managers had the most crowded diaries in the entire ecosystem. It remains unclear whether they are pressured to spend so much time fighting fires on difficult contracts that they do not recognise the good ones.

4.5   Micro-management

you move to a leaner, customer-focused delivery for FM holistically, it'd be like turkeys voting for Christmas, for want of a better term, on the client side. Because in probably 80% of the client functions in FM for our cost for the clients, you've got checkers checking checkers. **S1**

Tertius gaudens brokers seem to co-exist with an over fascination with KPIs[10] and micro-management, or what is seen as micro-management by client FMs. We have had tales of 'horrible contracts', verbal and even physical abuse of FM staff. We have also had tales of avoidance behaviour and defensive game playing, The excellence as experience individuals and the *Tertius Iungens* brokers spoke of avoiding, deferring or reinvesting penalties or even of bonuses!

Several interviewees, particularly on the supplier side, associated micro-management with situations in which the internal FMs became isolated from, or protective of, their own internal

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[9] A clumsy term. Various suppliers wished for an alternative

[10] 694 reported on monthly was the largest figure offered to us. It may have been a rhetorical flourish.

users and forced to justify their existence upwards purely in terms of – apparent – savings regardless of possible costs either passed on to other budgets or consumed in procurement processes. Some clients spoke of moving away from such traditional positions. Others spoke of mistrust of suppliers. Suppliers related instance of physical abuse of their staff and of 'horrible' contracts to work on. They also spoke of ways round such situations and informal black lists of certain individuals, or procurement consultants. Some saw little chance of change. Others described the isolated contract managers as a threatened species.

5   DISCUSSION

I would distinguish between perceived barriers and actual barriers. A lot of people will perceive price, contract price and contract as being barriers; not something I subscribe to. **S8**

Perceptions and assertions generate self-fulfilling behavious. We have many examples, less thoughtful than the quote above. The ecosystem is capable of achieving 'win-wins': service partnerships. It can also easily degenerate into a spiral of mutual recrimination where relationships break down or are mediated through increasingly antagonistic patterns to the benefit of procurement systems and surviving micro managers. There are many points in the ecosystem where a butterfly effect can trigger such a spiral.

Vargo et al (2015) consider institutionalization as a source of innovation in service ecosystems. Our data suggest that the FM ecosystem can become a victim of the institutionalization of SLAs, KPIs, and micro-management: patterns that may once have enabled but now limit performance (as identified by Price and Shaw, 1998). We also identify cases of such 'patterns' being 'shifted' by individuals or networks creating different conversations to the prevailing norms. The patterns of 20 years ago (Table 1) are still there but there are hopeful signs of change.

6   LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER WORK

We are limited here by the word-length available for the conference and by the detailed evaluation of the interview data. We have not been able to source support to extend the study into the procurement domain. We have only anecdotal rather than detailed and audited measures of the benefits of excellence (although those advocating it speak of hard lined justification of the investment). Many examples were provided in commercial confidence. We are conscious that operatives are under-represented in our data, as indeed they are in FM research in general (Smith, 1999 being the exception). We are also conscious that standard procurement departments and advisors are under-represented. Interviewees were volunteers and it may be that their act of volunteering was biased by a tendency to less traditional views.

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