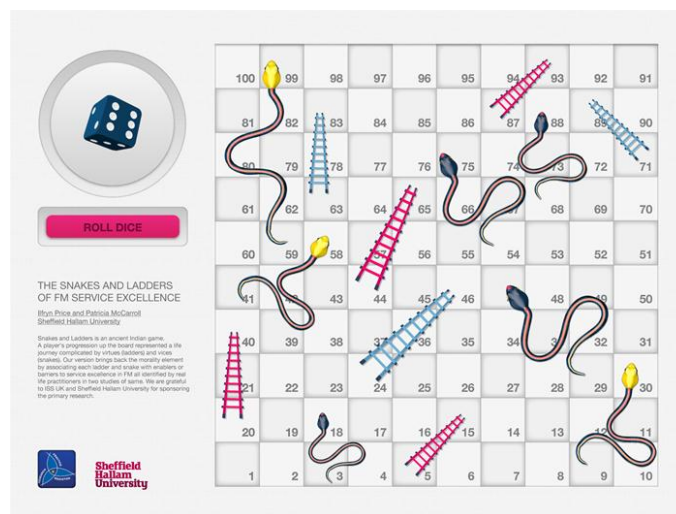




The snakes and ladders of FM service excellence

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Snakes and Ladders is an ancient Indian [board game](#) regarded today as a worldwide classic. The historic version had its root in morality lessons, where a player's progression up the board represented a life journey complicated by virtues (ladders) and vices (snakes). Our version brings back the morality element by associating each ladder and snake with enablers or barriers to service excellence in FM all identified by real life practitioners in two studies of same.

SNAKES AND LADDERS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A EuroFM working group has been seeking to prepare, and hold at EFMC 2015 in Glasgow:

A creative event that will change thinking on FM excellence.

We say that out of a consensus from our own research and that of others in the group, that the barriers to excellence are 'mindsets' or embedded assertions:

- That excellence is too expensive to achieve, or even aspire to
- That quality and value for money are to be found in ever more stringent application of rigid specifications and management of contracts via SLAs and KPIs

FM has developed a fixation with tender processes, KPIs and SLAs in the fond belief that just as surveyors can produce Bills of Quantity for a construction design so they can specify the operational relationships of a complex web of people over three, five, or seven years. Here is the Director of a very successful FM Business Unit - in a commercially successful FM business – discussing such contracts. We have added the emphasis.

*However, what you do find is six months into the contract there's always things in there that you didn't expect. **Always**. That then becomes down to the **relationship** that you have built or what they are like as people or as a business of how flexible they want to be. **The good ones** will say I understand this is the market, let's talk of how we can get around it. **The bad ones** are the ones that turn around and **say that's what you sold**, that's what we paid for, that's it, **get on with it**. Then you just have another four years of pain of trying to work it out. So a lot of that is around the business culture and how they want to work with you or not.*

Our 24 research interviews provide many variations on that basic theme. Service excellence involves reacting to the unexpected. Any contract actually functions as a complicated “web of relationships”¹: a web which can generate flexibility or innovation or degenerate into mutual pain and antagonism.

Given the strap line for EFMC 2015 “*FM ahead of the game*” we have embedded some of those variations and their consequences on a game board. While having fun players might like to reflect on the causes of, and solutions to, everyday problems from the world of FM.

In terms of the game there are ladder contracts – you move forwards - and snake contracts - you slide back. This report presents the accompanying evidence based on interviews with 12 clients – the most senior we could reach in 12 organisations and 12 suppliers ranging from Account Managers to directors of business units².

¹ Coenen C., Alexander K. and Kok H. (2013) Facility management value dimensions from a demand perspective. Journal of Facilities Management 11 (4) 339-353

² Commercially sensitive examples of particular practices have been excluded.

INTRODUCTION: PROJECT OVERVIEW

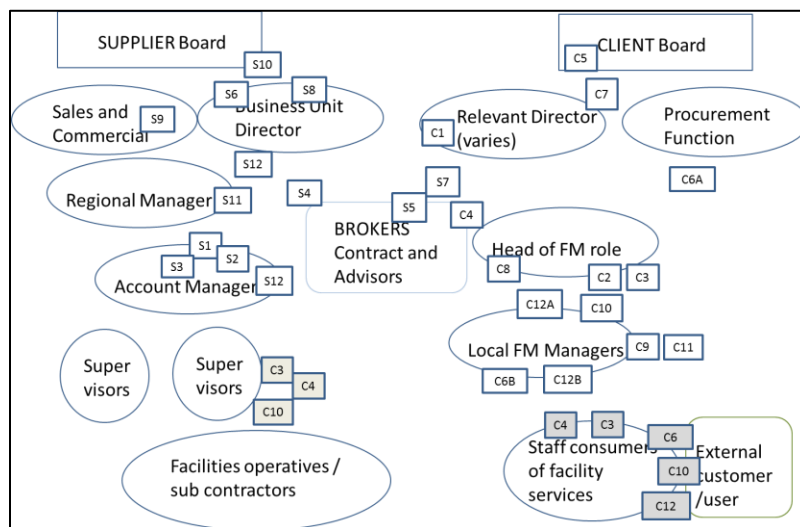
In 2013 Sheffield Hallam University's FM Centre were commissioned by ISS UK to understand client perceptions of service excellence³. We interviewed 12 of the most senior client side individuals responsible FM that we could reach. Where possible we also spoke to service users. The results grabbed people's attention as in the following

I have read your fantastic paper on Defining Service Excellence in FM and would love the opportunity to discuss it further with you and possibly explore the opportunity to develop the findings within my organisation. Financial Controller FM Supplier SME via LinkedIn On 17/02/2014

The research found two broad schools of thought⁴. One group equated excellence with a particular instance of personal service and tended to see it as transferable to the world of FM. A second saw excellence as opulence and unaffordable, or even undesirable, in today's world. Our strong impression, supported by interviewees' comments was that the first group were actually achieving better 'value'. They used less space and seemed to have better working environments. One business development director's reaction is in the box:

You mean there are companies who expect their staff to deliver excellence from crap working environments.
Are you just showing FMs are thick?

Several people suggested we replicate the research in the supplier community. With the support of the HE Innovation Fund we have conducted a second series of Interviews with people from 12 different supply organisations working at Account Management levels or higher. They include 9 of the 12 firms currently recognised as the global top tier⁵



Interviewees were assured of anonymity and commercial discretion but were encouraged to be open and frank. Sessions were recorded and transcribed. We report here only matters that were raised by several participants. Figure 1 seeks to position the interviews according to a general model of the parties found in any particular contract. In practice any 'contract' outcome reflects the complex web of relationships at multiple levels, something academic research into B2B

³ A full report is [here](#). A shorter summary presented at IFMA World Workplace, 2014 is [here](#).

⁴ Predicted in previous literature especially a study by Robert Johnston in 2004: Towards a better understanding of service excellence, *Managing Service Quality*, 14(2) 129 – 133.

⁵ I-FM [International FM Report](#)

marketing is beginning to describe as a service ecosystem⁶. The diagram reveals FM's service ecosystem.

We began all the interviews the same way by asking for, and exploring, an example of a personal experience of excellent service. We went on to ask about the transferability of same to FM. The Table summarises the range of opinions. Definitions of excellence are colour coded from deeper green (service experience) via service experience in affluent settings to opulence and even control (deeper orange). Transferability is similarly coded from yes through to relatively strong feelings that it is elective or undesirable. Interviewees are coded as in Figure 1. The more peoples' understanding of service excellence veers towards opulence or even control and compliance the less likely they are to see it as achievable or even desirable in FM.

Interview	Excellence is	Transferable
C1	Service experience	Yes, and showed us examples
C4	Service experience	Yes
C5	Service experience	Yes should be
C8	Service in a not too posh setting	Yes
C11	Service in a not too posh setting	Yes
S6	Service experience	Yes absolutely
S8	Individuals whose attitude shines out	Absolutely transferable
S7	Service experience.	Yes it is what she is encouraging
S3	Service experience	Yes.. Perhaps everybody
S9	Service experience	Yes help desk / service centre first
S11	Service experience	Yes if client wants it
S12	Service experience when not paying	Yes but Paying or not?
S2	Own service but then experience	Yes with right client
S4	Service experience.	Only at contract stage
S5	That bit extra Airline	Difficult. Often No
C2	Service in a posh setting	Yes if people have commitment
C7	Service in a posh setting	Selective reception and data mgmt
S1	Service on a posh setting	Yes but at cost
S10	Service of an up market car	Difficult. Cost a barrier
C6	Free upgrade to business class	Wants silent service
C12	Opulence Money no object	Yes selectively
C3	Opulence Posh Hotel	No. Would not want to be seen to do it
C9	Fine dining we provide	Yes selectively
C10	Done to standard I require	Depends on standards

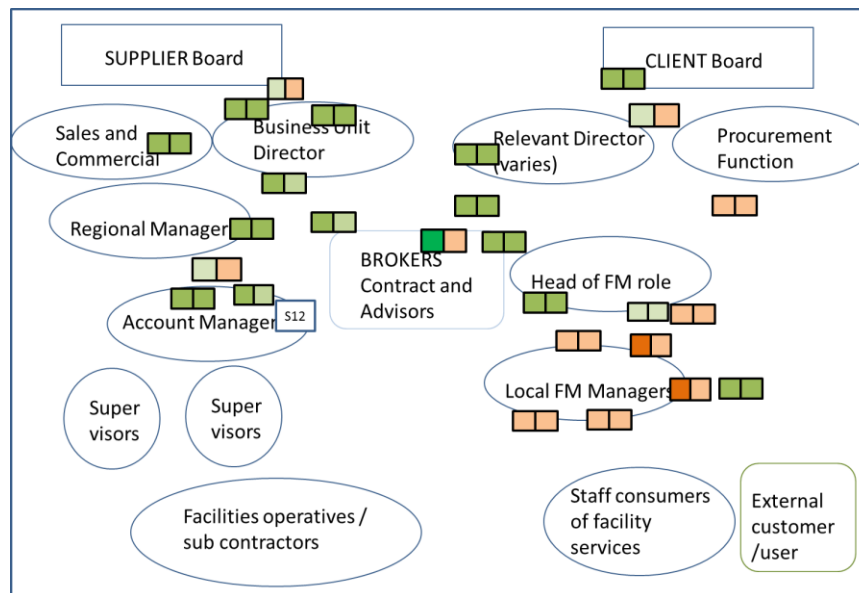
Using the same codes we can plot the pairs of 'excellence is' and transferability onto the ecosystem diagram. It is not all about position. There are senior level individuals on both sides who associate excellence with service in affluent settings or to expensive cars and they are less sanguine about service excellence in FM. That said most of the client side interviewees who saw excellence as desirable and achievable had better C suite connections. In their organisations FM was not on the board but it was appreciated, as more than a cost centre, at the board.

Vargo S. L., Wieland H. and Akaka, M. A (2015) Innovation through institutionalization: A service ecosystems perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management* 44 (1) 63–72.

The 'excellence is opulence' and unaffordable / undesirable clients tended to be isolated from the C suite⁷ and perhaps also from their own internal service users. In two of these cases local supervisors on the FM contract introduced us to users who nonetheless talked about the excellent service they saw themselves getting

Users appreciate service and convenience

Again there are board level individuals on the supply side who are sceptical about excellence as transferable. Having said which in our sample the view that excellence depends on particular, unusual, clients it is more prevalent further down the supply hierarchy. The pairings are shown in Figure 2.



Broadly then there are two main client side camps. The 'ladders' saw excellence as service, the extra mile, sought it, procured for it and managed for it. They were connected to the strategy of their organisations – at the board rather than necessarily on the board. Suppliers recognise such a camp though account managers especially describe it as rare.

The 'snakes' saw excellence as opulence tended to also favour formal procurement, complex SLAs and penalty based

management. Suppliers clearly recognise the existence of such a group. Some describe it as 'threatened'.

We could not interview procurement specialists but the 'snakes' tended to favour formalised procurement. The 'ladders' tended to see themselves rather than procurement advisers having most influence on selection of suppliers. They spoke of brokering relationships between suppliers and their users.

The supply industry recognises the existence of procurement specialists who thrive on the opposite: keeping two sides apart. Some even told us of individuals whose presence on a tender request was a criterion for not bidding.

⁷ This is not an argument for FM being on the board, only for FM at the board

SNAKES AND LADDERS OF FM: THE EVIDENCE

Basic Stance

Snake contracts are more likely where the client view is one of demonstrating worth to their own top management by cutting costs. They are likely where management structures are maintained, supposedly devoted to ensuring cost savings.

In probably 80% of the client functions in FM for our cost for the clients, you've got checkers checking checkers.

So it is a fine line on highlighting the benefits because nine times out of 10 a big chunk of saving is on the client's FM structure, and obviously, it does cause some concerns

Now I think the problem comes when, on the client side, when they become overly energetic around performance and the management of performance and it gets out of kilter with the relationship and management. And to the extent that the relationship breaks down because performance is being driven so hard and sometimes unreasonably and not in the spirit of the contract and the contractor feels hard done by. So you start then getting back to I'm going to deliver to the contract and nothing else. And the end result is that the client doesn't, in my view, doesn't end up with value for money because they only get what the contract said at best.

So in the short term you might think you're winning something from a client perspective but in the medium and long term you're not. And it becomes a thoroughly unpleasant place to work, which of course has an impact on staff, which then affects retention rates, sickness absence, health and safety. All those things come into play, which makes it much more difficult to deliver a resilient service when you haven't got your A team on the pitch.

What do you think might drive what you describe as the overly energetic management of performance?

It could be a number of things. One, a desire on the part of those doing the measuring to demonstrate that they're adding some value.

I've no direct evidence of this but it wouldn't surprise me, you know, if organisations sometimes set budgets on the basis of a recovery of a certain amount of contract value through performance and, therefore, people have targets

Ladder contracts are more likely where the client is seeking a service partner and expertise that will contribute to their core business.

Things around innovation, how they deal with people, about how they reward and develop people, about how they deal with risk and reward in contracts, about how they put themselves out there in terms of measurement and how they actually connect with customers and all those kinds of things.

The commercial proposition has to be explored but that isn't about "tell us what your cost per sq foot is in cleaning" or whatever. That doesn't tell you anything, and in fact it doesn't even get you to a sensible cost per sq foot for cleaning a bloody place in the first place.

*If you were going to source from a procurement perspective something, there's always a scope of works, there's always a price that people want to get to and all of those things, and we had all of that but over and above arching over it was how do we **make sure that we're partnering with organisations who truly, truly understand service delivery** and get the whole behaviour and culture of this.*

So, you know, a lot of them are under pressure themselves and we have to be able to recognise that. What is driving that pressure? Is it cost-cutting globally, which is having an impact on them? Do they feel threatened, do they feel like their position's going to be outsourced eventually? What can we do to make them look good and ultimately make us look good?

It is not automatic. We encountered clients with a ladder stance which was not recognised by the relevant regional managers. We also encountered contracts set up at a higher level from a more snake like perspective where local service managers were delivering what the client's users saw as excellent service. It may be that paying or not impacts perceptions of excellence. One interviewee made the point in their personal example.

It may be that paying or not impacts perceptions of excellence

Procurement

Sometimes procurement stifles innovation.

Ladder clients described conscious efforts to go beyond the standard service specifications, to look for innovation and sometimes to keep things simple. Snake clients were more likely to put their faith in ever more elaborate specifications. Smart suppliers are increasingly recognizing the difference.

We know the customers which are a pain and we know the customers generally that are pretty good.

*You've got your procurement-led bids that don't engage with the site operators, as in client side operators, and they don't know what they've bought. **And that is exceptionally common, probably at 90%, believe it or not,** for big deals, which obviously then causes friction with your operators and your client on site because neither party are clear on what they've bought.*

So you almost go into an area of conflict very quickly, but if you manage it correctly, then it can float. Then you get the measure of the customer. So the ones that are good are the ones that understand what you've said and they fairly judge and say agree with that, I'm happy for that to be in or I'm not happy with

*Then there are clients that, you know, you're just delivering a service, you're not important to me, there's nothing else you can do for us really. They have a more restricted view. **I don't like clients like that very much.** They're also bloody hard work to tender for as well. A lot of it starts during the tender process if it's new business. So there is a tendency for a lot of clients to have a very restrictive view, a very restrictive process, i.e. no engagement with the supply chain. Madness, in my opinion.*

It's all on the numbers, it's all completely... almost as if they can be removed from the process. That means we don't understand what they want. ...

To be honest, we wouldn't even bid a job if we didn't know the client and there was a consultant involved who we've worked with before and we weren't impressed. We would just not bother bidding. It's part of our no-bid criteria.

Again it is not always cut and dried. Some clients will say that they were simply not believed.

I think we were a bit of an oddity to XYZ when they first came here that you know we talked about negotiating a KPI failure, it was almost like "why are you doing that, what's your ulterior motive for that?" "Well, we haven't got one".

Mistrust, I think there's always going to be an element of that and I think that's because of the whole bid stage, I still don't think that they've got it right. And that's because if I put in the money that I think that would give that the absolute gold-plated service, I would never win the work. So you always take a risk on putting a price that is tough but you think you can do it. So you're never ever going to be gold plated in year one, year two. So people come in and think you're going to be gold plated and you're not, but you can't say that in bid stage because they would knock you out. So until that changes, and I don't think that ever will, you're always going to get this area of mistrust.

You cannot procure a relationship the way you procure bricks and mortar.

I was saying earlier to the professor that I think too many procurement or people involved in procurement are trying to buy a service in a box off the shelf. And so it's driven by price, it's driven by technical specification and a couple of other measurables. And my perception is that their driving ambition is to get that for as cheap as possible and that there's no element of... or there's very little quality element there and there's very little recognition given of this is a service that we deliver and the more you drive our cost and that sort of thing, because the bulk of the cost actually sits with labour in FM and that sort of thing, the harder it's going to be to deliver that. And often procurement will then hand that over to someone within their organisation to go and manage. And I've had it before where procurement negotiated something but the site person or site manager or whoever for that organisation is not in agreement with that and doesn't have the authority to actually push back against procurement.

Contract Management

The procurement issues carry forward. Snake contracts are much more likely where there is an excess of KPIs that do not actually ensure users are getting the service they would like.

*Are we capturing the right data? Probably not always. But that's often client-led as well. I've had clients, particularly in the banking sector, there **was one client that I know that had six hundred and ninety-four KPIs** that you had to be reported on every single month. Now that meant we had to have a lot of people gathering all of that data, putting it in the spreadsheets and whatever.*

Because you can fall in a trap quite easily of trying to measure X amount of SLAs, KPIs, etcetera, etcetera, get no value out of them whatsoever and you've people tied up writing reports on things people don't read and it means absolutely nothing.

When you look at some of the measures that are applied to PFIs. You know, the measures that are being applied, are they the right measures? It's all about have you moved this, have you cleaned that, have you done this? That isn't actually what the customer's looking for. You're measuring the wrong things. So I suspect, you know, a more enlightened view of how you might measure success wouldn't necessarily throw out everything that, you know, we currently measure. But would enhance it and widen it so that it reflected a more subjective assessment of people's experience of our performance, rather than simply the output measures.

"I want my supplier to get a massive amount of money out of us by performing well"

Ladder contracts are more likely where the emphasis is on rectifying rather than penalising service failures.

"I want my supplier to get a massive amount of money out of us by performing well"

I think that the biggest barrier is probably in the passion with measurements. You almost need to say this has to be beyond measurement, it has to be something that is more about the emotion and engagement between customers and organisations and the people in them.

They help if they are not complicated. They help if you sit down in a civilised fashion and say why do you really want that?

If you look at a number of our monthly reports, and it's an interesting reflection on the relationship and the way that the contracts are set up. You know, I've worked in the corporate sector, far more focused on feedback from customers, positive and negative, whereas in the PFI environment, it seems to be far more focused on the negative. There's very little recognition of the positive.

We have a monthly, it's a monthly card that goes out to every building, the responsible person, let's say, in every building, and they make an assessment monthly on what they think out of five, I think it's out of five or ten.

They help if they are not complicated. They help if you sit down in a civilised fashion and say why do you really want that? Because you can fall in a trap quite easily of trying to measure X [Type a quote from the document or the summary of an interesting point. You can position the text box anywhere in the document. Use the Drawing Tools tab to change the formatting of the pull quote text box.]

amount of SLAs, KPIs, etcetera, etcetera, get no value out of them whatsoever and you've people tied up writing reports on things people don't read and it means absolutely nothing.

Our strategy is actually we don't want to do that, we don't want you to go, we want you to succeed. So therefore if you fail it in one month we're going to give you two months to put it right.

If you put it right in the two months and thereafter you deliver, then you get it back.

We want them to do well, because if they do well, if they deliver a great service, then we'll have customers that want to stay in our buildings

But a true partnership that we've had with a long time are ones that you can sit down with the client and talk openly and honestly. You can talk about where you're not doing so well and where you are and, because you're honest, you can... all of it, you can work with it.

We ran it as we wanted a partnership with the cleaning provider. So we didn't include any penalty clauses in.

DELIVERING EXCELLENCE

The supplier studies also revealed barriers and enablers of delivering service excellence.

The front line

FM is a business whose 'fee earners' are mainly low paid front line staff.

That doesn't necessarily mean he's going to arrive at work with a smile on his face. He can go and do the job or the task and that sort of thing but he can be grumpy, obnoxious and leave a mess while he's cleaning because he wasn't trained to clean up. And so he can do the job but everything else that happens around that can actually be very destructive for your relationship with the client for what you're trying to achieve in SLAs, KPIs and service excellence. So, for me, people are the main issue around whether you have service excellence or you don't. It's the attitude that they arrive at work with in the morning that makes the difference.

We do employ a lot of the immigrant community that come over here and I think it's easy to overlook them and say, well, it's a low paid job, you know, and we don't need to invest any time or effort in training and managing these people, but actually, you do.

There is no consensus on whether ideal front line staff are born or made

There was a massive training programme for the staff that went on, to learn how to kind of work a performance specification, rather than I want you to go in that room every day and Hoover that floor, vacuum that floor. It was go in that room, assess whether the floor needs vacuuming, if it does, do it, if it doesn't, go the next room.

Yeah. People is the biggest difficulty we've got in this job. Because if you think about it, we generally... we sell people, in a way that's what we do, you know. You sell people the right skills. We're a people-orientated business.

What inhibits it? Capability and buy-in of frontline staff, even management on site level because it's got to come from the top.

But 'ladder' clients recognised the need to invest in training and development of supplier staff

I mean that cleaning team, security team and maintenance team are the ones that touch the clients much more than we do 'cause they are the front-facing guys. They're out there cleaning around the buildings and touching our clients much more than we are and that's why it's so important to articulate the vision of what we're trying to achieve, because if they don't understand it, how the hell are they going to be able to...

You know people who get to me about this stuff really need to wake up. This is must-do. We get very handsome payback for making those investments with our people. Can I give you another story?

and of embracing the living wage

Since embracing the living wage combined with things like service excellence we've been able to do a number of things. One is that we've been able to produce all sorts of new initiatives with much greater cooperation and support from the people on the ground, including things like daytime cleaning which has helped with our sustainability agenda in terms of operating our offices 24/7. Our offices are open 24/7 but having to basically keep the lights on throughout the night basically to clean a building is quite a big proposition for us. So we've been able to do that. We've been able to see real advances in productivity with adoption of new working practices. We've seen things like churn and retention improve, so basically we're not stung with all the hidden costs of new people coming into our business and the strain of having to train and orientate them into the business.

By and large suppliers recognise the issues above. There are debates about how to achieve 'empowerment' in practice. When is the customer now always right?

I think sometimes you've got to push back. Sometimes you've got to... the customer's always right of course, but not all the time so I think sometimes you learn to have the thick skin where you have to support your team. Like I said, to use the analogy of the City, you know, literally, they did throw a cup of coffee at one of my staff, so you have to, whilst you do it in the right way and be polite ...

Relationship management

The industry recognises, and invests in, relationship management at all levels.

If something's not right we'll have a meeting, we'll have a discussion and talk it through

I talk to the partner at this level, my account director talks to them at this level, and at the partner I would actually say we've got a real issue here because your person, John Smith and Karen Smith, they're a pain, they're a complete pain in the arse, and he goes yeah, you're right, I'm trying to think about removing them or changing them around.

***If something's not right
we'll have a meeting,
we'll have a discussion
and talk it through***

You have a resource who is available to work with the clients to help them develop their FM strategy and what they could look like in the future, and that's a cost 'cause you need somebody with some experience, probably from client and FM supplier side to help people understand, right, where are you now, what is your FM journey, what do you want it to look like in the future?

The other thing about our business which is different to a lot of others anyway, is that there are a lot of key relationships. You know, so it still a relationship business. And I'm not saying that you don't win a contract because you're down the pub with someone, but it will give you a foot in the door. So there's still a lot of that that goes on, in the right way, not in negative way but we are a relationship business. So I know customers now that I know intimately inside and out. If they moved over here, I know he's going to want me in there, so... and just... so that's how it works. That's how our industry works.

including systems to cope with changes

As clients change often. Why are we having that? Well, we're having that because your predecessor wanted it and here's all the documentation to support that.

*Yeah. So an individual could move and he could take the culture with him. So, without a doubt, contract managers from the client's side can be culture carriers and can change how they work, without a doubt. So we see that quite a bit. You know, when we have John Smith who has been very difficult to work with and he moves into an area where we're trying to win that business, you know, that can either dampen our spirits or vice-versa. We hope they go to a contract where we've got one of our competitors that we don't like so much and give them the problem. And it can work both ways. It can open up the gate for us, you know, because difficult John Smith has gone. Someone else comes in, all of a sudden the contract starts to work, or they go right in place of where we are and they become a barrier again. **But without a doubt we can see the ones that are fair and not fair.***

And we have to be intelligent enough and have a ability to listen to the detail of what you're being told sufficiently well to interpret the balance and the difference in menu that each one has and be aware of the fact that that menu might change. So we would typically talk to directors of estates and get a message one week. If they have a board meeting the following week and the Chief Executive changes the direction slightly, that message could easily change

and management of 'front line' relationships. Some users spoke to us about the personnel treatment they received from help desks or 'floor managers'. We saw some in action even in contracts where the overall stance was 'snake'. Account managers spoke of the same benefits but also the worry they would be perceived as expense.

I can't honestly say I can name a terrible, and that's not because they're sitting there. I have been here at the company for 10 years and I've used facilities extensively. The biggest thing for me is communication. We now have a system where we actually log calls by picking up the telephone if we've got problems and we get a reference number back so you know that you have a log of the call. 9 times out of 10 the call is done within a day or two days. If it's something like key cutting that could potentially take a bit longer, but on the whole if you're in a room and you haven't got a flip chart you can phone up and 5 minutes later someone is coming along pushing a flip chart for you. It might be arranging chairs in a larger conference room, anything at all.

A floor captain would be a good example. ... So they're walking round all day, albeit, yeah, it's labour but from a service excellence perspective they're checking the coffee areas, they're meeting and greeting visitors, they're doing AV support, they're doing mail, they're doing photocopier paper, they're doing spot cleaning, they're spotting hazards;

We have service managers who cut across all service lines and we give them an iPad or tablet, which is effectively a mobile helpdesk. So these individuals are acting as a conduit or mobile helpdesk rather than actually having to phone a number,

'cause obviously there's this whole thing, well, I don't necessarily associate good customer service with phoning a number and having some person in Leeds answer it and action it, sometimes I just want to know that Nigel, who I know who works in the building, will sort the problem out for me.

Integral to relationship management is working at little extras, again at all levels,

A charity of underprivileged children, where we interview and help people like that.

All these things, if you thought about it, none of them are in the contract and we could say no. But what it does is it makes us a partner and if you're a partner it's harder for them to say we want you to go, in a nutshell. So the value added for me is all the things that you are doing on top of your specification that the client goes that's fantastic,

So, from my point of view, service excellence for me is delivering a contract, okay, to the KPIs and SLAs that are in there and then being able to show what more we've done, where we've bought additional value to the client's business. So how have we made the operation that happens on site, how have we made it easier for the client. And so much of that is about what my staff and my teams do on the sites that adds a little bit of extra value. It's going that extra mile.

including the unexpected.

Now they recognise what's important to us and what isn't. So, for example, the other week, we had Prince Edward here so, you know, the level of expectation suddenly goes up for that and I think that's the thing that all the whole team recognise now

Now, the facilities management go out of their way to assist the unit by putting up a marquee, putting catering facilities, and actually, this year, they're even providing a band, paying for a band for them.

Again it means letting the front line know they are trusted to deliver

So most of the interaction with customers is usually about sorting out a problem which, in the majority of cases, can be dealt with there and then on the spot by an individual who's prepared to take the responsibility for sorting it out.

And most of the situations that you're talking at an operational level are not going to cost the company big bucks. So if the meal is wrong, the meal is wrong, I'll replace your meal. I'm not going to argue about whether it was right or wrong, I'll sort it out. If that place is not clean, we'll come and clean it. I'm not going to debate whether we cleaned it or not, we'll come and clean it again. So, you know, I think there is a... the existence of a contract gets in the way of a natural desire to do the right thing.

SELF FULFILLING ASSERTIONS

Throughout the interviews is the theme of individuals “declaring reality into existence”. A client FM manager whose view of tendering is that:

It's got to be properly handled, and that's how we do business here, and I think every business should ensure that they have an unbiased way of awarding various contracts

Will find it hard to avoid

self-appointed experts come in and get in the way of that interpretation of what the client's looking for. I've had plenty of examples where they have got in the way and they're not helpful and there's... I mean, occasionally, the advice they give baffles me and I don't know why certain individuals are ever appointed, you know. I have to be very careful what I say. We do have to work with a lot of consultants, as you can imagine.

A supplier who views procurement as

a bit like that dog on the lead where, you know, the master is the person walking the dog, but actually, you see those dogs straining the lead and dragging the master. I think they're a bit like that. So I think procurement... put it this way, my experience of procurement is that they take the lead and, in most cases, they are driving it down to the lowest common denominator. I dare say there are some out there who try and balance things out and look at a bit more than that, you know, so that they would, you know, if they felt that somebody had a very low price but they clearly have no health and safety, for example, well, that would be a stupid thing to go for. So I do think there's an element of, you know, you can only go so far, but generally, they are driving price, and I think it's a simple matter that they are rewarded on it, they are paid on it, they are commissioned on it, the procurement companies who go in and do it are commissioned on it, often their fees are based on it, and it's quite a natural human thing therefore to say you're going to do a balanced view but actually following the thing that we're going to get paid

is likely to view actual quality of service as

I want to paraphrase this, shit, and people recognise it is, but actually they're willing to do it because they get that cost benefit.

and not distinguished perceived and real barriers.

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.

A considerable assertion builds up that ‘snake’ managers are part of the problem. It does not always extend to helping them change.

But you know, it's interesting and it's very easy to sit and make these observations but, again, you know these people are in jobs, they've got families to support. They've got a job to do, you know, in a difficult environment. I understand their motivations and it's not easy when they've been doing what they've been doing for as long as they've been doing it to suddenly do something differently and take that leap of faith that actually something could be better.

BOTTLENECKS

The industry is clearly seeing the emergence of, and probable consolidation of, a tier of 'global' suppliers. In different ways individuals spoke of particular corporate plans and processes for learning and sharing experiences in what have become very large and dispersed ventures. Many details, even if they are known as individuals move around, are clearly confidential in a report of this kind.

One challenge is getting ideas from one front line to another:

That would be the main criticism I'd have. I think, like I said, there's lots of my guys out on the shop floor, cleaning operatives, helpdesk, housekeeping staff that I have doing wonderful things and probably I'm not even aware of them, and perhaps that's somewhere they need to focus, perhaps, you know, they need to include some of those people in how they look at service excellence, because if they're doing it and they're inventing some of it, I often think it's forgotten. Something will come down from above and say, you know, we're going to do this initiative, we're going to do that, and again, great ideas, but often may be missed on the frontline a little bit.

Another is that the regional managers become the bottleneck. As one put it:

So we are a major part of improving... we're a major link in that communication link. 'Cause what happens is I have a problem on site, the client wants to see something done about it and what's the best way to get something done? Go to the person's boss. And it doesn't matter where you are. If you're phoning the pizza place, you don't speak to the lady on the phone who's answering for the pizza, can I speak to your manager, can I speak to your supervisor, whatever. And you generally try and hop over whoever the middle person is. Your business director, whoever it is and that sort of thing should actually just why not take the call in the first place or just divert it back to the regional man. And so what happens, the regional becomes the juggling act in between trying to make all of this work on the sites.

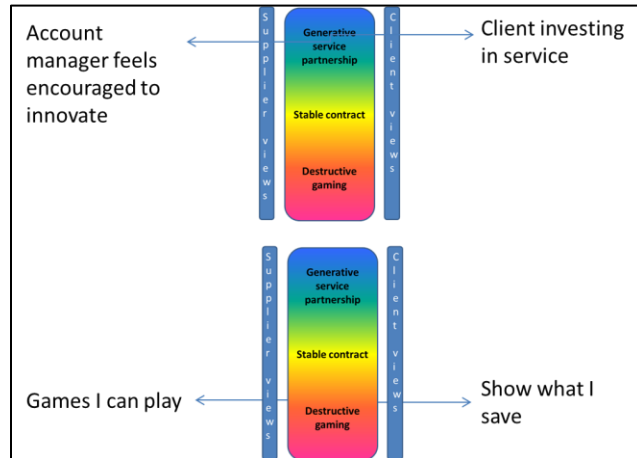
But the regional person is the person who's now... all these initiatives and if HR requires something, finance are trying to get better results or whoever it is, it all comes through to the regional manager to now go and disseminate all that information, then consolidate everything and then give them back what they want. And I've been working on a number of different ways to try and make that an easier flow of communication. So you have all these initiatives coming through from head office and whoever else, comes through your regional manager, then goes down to the sites. You then also have all of your clients, have all of these expectations come through to your regional manager. And he's either got to get resolved at site level or he's got to go back to centre to get someone to make a decision.

DISCUSSION

What the 'ladders' have in common is a view of FM that concerns people and relationships. This is not the place for an academic diversion into theory⁸. Various practices for actually managing in that way have been described in the research, usually as perceived sources of advantage for the organisations concerned: hence commercially sensitive and not reportable in detail.

Equally sensitive, from the client interviews are the various ways FM was seen as contributing, adding value to use a hackneyed term, to the 'business concerned' either directly via the true end user experience or indirectly via cost protection and improved asset utilisation. Suppliers, caught up in the bottlenecks of day to day business and dealing with problems and 'snakes' did not necessarily always get such contributions. Understanding those remains a challenge.

There may be an inherent bias in the samples we interviewed. Subjectively it seems 'ladder' clients were more likely to make themselves available early in the research process. Were those with a greater belief in service excellence in FM more willing to participate? Account managers tend to perceive 80 to 90 % of current clients as adhering to 'snake' practices but more senior people on the supplier side do report a more balanced view. More comparative work is needed.



As seen above the stable contract envisaged by those who negotiate it is unlikely to last. External changes but also the perceptions and signals on either side push the relationship one way or the other with various shades of imbalance.

The next challenge is to render these observations into a more specific and quantifiable predictive model appropriate to a particular given contract.

Meanwhile please try the snakes and ladders of FM to open a dialogue of your own contract. What resonates? What do you disagree with?

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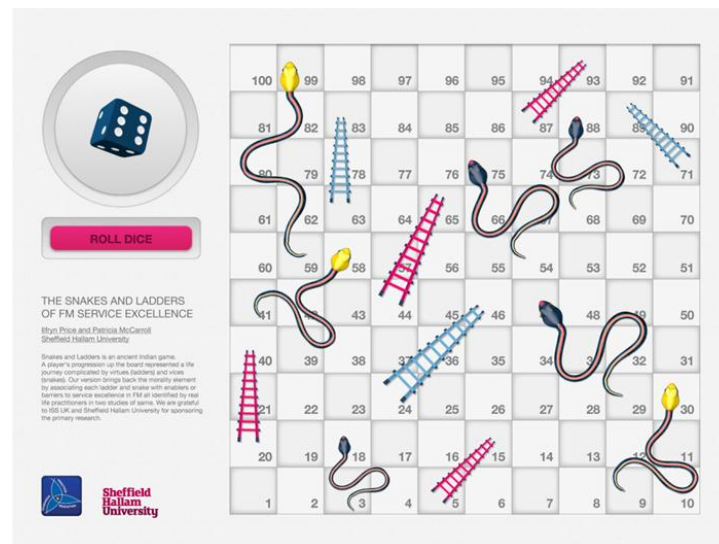
The Game board was designed and coded by Sheffield Hallam's [Cultural, Communication and Computing Research Institute](#)

⁸ Several other papers in the People make FM track at EFMC 2015 make important contributions as do contributors to K. Alexander and I. Price (Eds. 2012) *Managing Organizational Ecologies: Space, Management and Organization*. New York, Routledge,

APPENDIX: HOW TO PLAY

Snakes and Ladders is an ancient Indian [board game](#) regarded today as a worldwide classic.^[1] It is played between two or more [players](#) on a gameboard having numbered, gridded squares. A number of "ladders" and "snakes" are pictured on the board, each connecting two specific board squares. The object of the game is to navigate one's game piece, according to [die](#) rolls, from the start (bottom square) to the finish (top square), helped or hindered by ladders and snakes respectively. The historic version had its root in morality lessons, where a player's progression up the board represented a life journey complicated by virtues (ladders) and vices (snakes).

Our version brings back the morality element by associating each ladder and snake with enablers or barriers to service excellence in FM.



A web enabled version of the game is under construction. Here are the instructions.

- **Decide who goes first.** Each team rolls the dice. Whoever rolls the highest number gets to play first
- **Roll the die and move.** To take your turn, roll the dice again and read the number that you rolled. Pick up your game piece and move forward that number of spaces. For example, if you roll a two, move your piece to square two. On your next turn, if you roll a five, move your piece forward five squares, ending up on square seven.
- **Climb up ladders.** If you land exactly on a square with the base of a ladder, your game piece climbs up the ladder to the square at the top of the ladder.

Read the story that tells you why you have been rewarded.

- **Slide down the snakes if you land on a snake** - down you go!

Read the story of why the snake has got you! You can ask the audience for a review.

- **First to 100 wins**

We intend later versions of the game to include questions also ask the audience or phone a friend and a 'go to jail' option



The snakes and ladders of FM service excellence

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