

From microfibre to robotics: How the cleaning industry evolved over the past 15 years

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Synopsis

Holly Stockbridge-Hodgson has worked in the cleaning industry for over 15 years. She started her career at Ocean Contract Cleaning, and has held roles in Business Development, Innovation, and Change Management at ISS, Facilicom, ENGIE, and Pioneer FM, where she is currently Partnerships Director. In this article Holly reflects on the changes she has seen in the industry, and where she thinks the future lies.

A look back to 2007

I joined the cleaning industry in 2007 as Business Development Manager for Ocean Contract Cleaning. Back then my understanding of the industry was mainly thanks to my father: he sold Karcher machines for most of my childhood. So, I knew the difference between a scrubber dryer, and pressure washer. But that was about it.

When I first embarked on my professional journey, it was clear innovation wasn't truly embraced. It certainly wasn't understood how an innovation could impact on the bottom line. What stood out during those early years of bidding for contracts was the percentage of scores for sustainability and innovation in tenders was low, averaging about 3-5% of the overall marks.

And my answers in those bids were similarly basic. For example, I'd cover off 'innovation' questions with "we'll use microfibre cloths and mop heads", while I'd answer 'sustainability' questions with "carbon offsetting through the world land trust."

Notably, during this time most bids were won on price, which accounted for 70% of the overall score for any Most Economically Advantageous Tender (MEAT) OJEU bid. This left little room to implement any additional costs for innovation and sustainability. In fact, costs were driven down by cutting cleaning hours, without any real methodology for how these reduction in hours could be achieved.

Area Manager responsibilities were also becoming unrealistic with 30+ contracts and 120+ operatives to manage. Even with my limited knowledge of the industry, I knew something had to change.

During 2007-2011 I worked for Ocean, ISS, and Facilicom. All three had similar approaches. They were winning bids based on cost, and not the development of long-term innovative and sustainable partnerships. But I could see there was a need to evolve – how else would the industry grow without innovation?

It was only when I moved to Balfour Beatty Living Places (BBLP) – a U.K. highways company – at the end of 2011 that I sensed I had an opportunity to impact how contracts were delivered, and that I could finally drive some innovative and sustainable ways of working into winning bids.

Living Places wanted to develop long-term partnerships with their clients and that meant a shift in thinking from short-term ‘business as usual’ to future-prepping. In response, they created an FM team which BBLP empowered to develop winning proposals based on quality, not only price. I knew quality would come through innovation and sustainability – and these two elements soon became central to the bids I worked on.

Fast forward to 2012

In 2012 I was bidding multiple cleaning and TFM contracts for the public, education, and private sector, transferring from Living Places to Balfour Beatty Workplace. Here, the quality-to-price ratio was more favourable with the average bid a 50/50 split. It was during this period that I started to notice more importance given to approaches to sustainability and innovation within tender proposals. With that in mind, I refused to sell microfibre cloths as a sustainable innovation anymore. I knew that the key to innovation was the holy trinity of:

1. Productivity increase
2. Return on investment, and
3. A more sustainable approach.

A few innovations from then really stuck out to me.

1. PVA cleaning chemical sachets – no more overdosing, reduced cost to purchase, and a massive reduction in single use plastic usage and carbon emissions. We implemented these at hundreds of Balfour sites.
2. SkyVac – This high-level cleaning and gutter cleaning system reduced the requirement for access equipment and ensured those hard-to-reach areas could now be cleaned at a fraction of the cost.
3. Rubbermaid pulse mops – I love the pulse mops. So easy to use, they have changeable mop heads to ensure colour coding and the on-handle water caddy means that operatives don’t have to carry buckets of water around with them, which is great for health and safety. However, these mops are still not loved by operatives, who still prefer to use a traditional dolly mop and bucket. As good as an innovation is, if people don’t use it, is it innovative?

4. Time and attendance systems – The early system we used at Balfour was Ezitracker, but only the most basic of functions, with staff needing a dedicated phone in our client's premises to log onto their shift. Not that innovative, but it was better than signing a paper logbook that could easily be falsified.

2014: Sustainability and Innovation become more prevalent

In 2014 Balfour Beatty Workplace was acquired by Cofely, part of the GDF Suez Group. Here, I led the soft services solutioning for all major TFM bids, focusing on sourcing and implementing the best innovations into winning proposals. It was during this time that I discovered Stabilised Aqueous Ozone (SAO) and we started to include it in some of our bids.

(For those of you that haven't heard of SAO before, it is a powerful and effective cleaner, sanitiser, and deodoriser. Made from just water, oxygen, and electricity, it is proven to kill up to 99.999% of harmful bacteria and viruses. It's a simple and sustainable way to clean and reduces chemical use by up to 90% and also plastic waste. And it requires no COSHH regulations as it doesn't contain any harmful substances. What's not to love?)

Between 2015 – 2016, I worked closely with now CEO of Pioneer FM, Mary-Jane Pettit to implement SAO across various sites. It was also during this time that I won GDF Suez Group Innovation Employees choice award, for my work on SAO, something I'm still proud about to this day.

2017 a move into Innovation

By 2017 I'd progressed to Innovation Manager at ENGIE (following the rebrand of GDF Suez). While here, I was given the opportunity to design and deliver an Innovation Week Showcase event. This event gave me the opportunity to showcase the best cleaning innovations out there, alongside TFM and Energy innovations. Some of the best innovations we had on show in 2017 were:

- Cheeky Panda – sustainable toilet roll made from Bamboo. This was their first exhibition event, and they are now a global brand, and can be found in all major supermarkets, Amazon, and Pioneer FM!
- ICE Robotic vacuum cleaners and scrubber dryers (it's amazing to think that five years ago people were still dubious of robotics).
- Smart cleaning from SPICA – they created a digital map of premises with real time sensor technology enabling SMART decisions to be made about the scheduling of cleaning tasks. This really played into the hands of an output cleaning specification. The data collected with this technology was amazing.

2021: A new approach

Fast forward to 2021 and I joined Pioneer FM to help drive forward their approach to partnerships and OJEU bidding.

Over the past six months there has been a renewed focus on price within bids, with some having an 80/20 price/quality ratio. This has made the bidding landscape more difficult than ever. Customers now expect innovative and sustainable approaches to the cleaning of their buildings as standard. But one of the major challenges is that some customers do not want to pay for it.

This focus on price is not allowing Cleaning, Soft FM, and TFM companies to put their best solutions

forward and it is going to have a long-lasting effect on the industry, which will take years to repair. There is so much sustainable and innovative cleaning equipment, materials, chemicals, software, and uniforms out there now.

But companies fear including them because of the effect on the bottom line.

In the future, I hope to see more bids back to the 50/50 price/quality ratio, or even 40/60. This will enable companies, such as Pioneer FM the opportunity to propose solutions that are sustainable, innovative, and create the foundations for long term partnerships.

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