

## 300North speaks to IWFM's Mark Whittaker

3 years ago



*For National Careers Week, recruitment experts [300North](#) interviewed Mark Whittaker to spotlight FM careers and discuss how people are moving into and within the sector.*

The FM workforce comes from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, with many falling into the sector or not having clarity over the breadth of the opportunities available in it. In this interview, the team asked Mark about the jobs he's had, his entry into the FM sector, his work with IWFM over the last 14 years, and how he thinks the sector has changed.

300 North: What was your first ever job?

Mark: It was a Saturday job at the local butchers serving at the counter! I'd got to that stage as a 17 year old where I wanted to earn some money and my dad said, "Well you've got to go out and find a job", and I said, "What do you expect me to do, just ring through to companies in the yellow pages?!"

My dad said, "yes, that's what you're going to have to do." And so that's what I did. I rang up and started with the local butchers and worked there for just under a year. I think I got paid £12 a day or something like that.

300 North: What was your personal journey into FM and did you know you were joining the FM sector as such when you first started?

Mark: My career has been characterised I suppose by working for organisations for a long period of time. Since I left my Economics degree my first job was ten and a half years, my next job was six and a half years and then another ten and a half years and now I've got three and a half years here with Thomson

FM.

I applied for 110 jobs from graduating to November 1991. I kept all of my rejection letters – I still have them in the loft. My grandad said at the time, “Just persevere – you will get where you need to be”. And my 110th application was successful – it was literally the day before my graduation ceremony that I got a job offer and I ended up there for ten and a half years working in insurance. Brilliant job, brilliant people, but you go through the hard miles first – you go through rejection, rejection, what is it I’m doing wrong? What could I have done better? And then something happens and it was that, “Oh I’ll give this number a call”, and I wasn’t really thinking about doing the call but I got a ten and a half year career as a result of it!

From a point of view of getting into FM like a lot of other people historically, you basically fall into it. My path into FM was working for a contractor that wanted to grow their commercial offering so they asked me to go away and do a viability study for how they would go about doing that. I locked myself in the University of Manchester Business Library for three days and got them intel reports on facilities management and started to swot up about it and understand the size and the variety of the industry.

From there I thought it was the right time to move on to a different role so I looked out for roles within the FM profession. Timing-wise I managed to get an opportunity at Integral and that was my inroad into facilities management. I can’t say I had this clear idea, it just evolved into that from the research I’d done and thinking actually this is a growing, varied industry that I didn’t know too much about, but there’s an opportunity for progression in there.

300 North: FM roles as you say are varied and people fall into it. What changes have you experienced since you started in the sector?

Mark: What really interested me was the variety of both the roles, but fundamentally the type of buildings that were involved. My first ever site visit I did with Integral was at HMP Manchester – Strangeways as was. Didn’t expect that! And then suddenly I got to be involved in looking at the Museums of Liverpool or English Heritage and lots of different sites so that was really quite interesting.

As we’ve become a lot more data savvy systems have been able to accommodate and drive data analytics within the profession – that’s changed substantially over that period of time.

I think organisations’ commitments to certain things such as sustainability and the social value side of things has changed over time as well. This has changed the agenda and some of the issues facing the industry: skills shortages, Brexit, pandemic, there have been a lot of things that suddenly have come along the way that have shaped the profession going forward and brought a lot of variety.

300 North: When you were working on that variety of contracts including with English Heritage, what did you most enjoy?

Mark: There were lots of different protocols and you’re working with different environments. One of the contracts I loved most when I was at Integral was the Museums of Liverpool because they were a brilliant client, really lovely people, and really collaborative. And fundamentally they had really interesting buildings and critical environments.

You’ve got the Conservation Centre where the conditions had to be maintained to restore some Egyptian papyrus or you’ve got the Ant Rope which I used in lectures to FM graduates at Liverpool John Moore’s to

say “We’re responsible for maintaining the conditions within that room and if they’re not right, that rare breed of ant will die”. We may work for a university where they’ve got years and years of research and if we don’t maintain that or our backup systems, if something goes wrong (for example the mains power goes down and there isn’t a backup) you could potentially have years worth of research that is essentially destroyed.

When you’re talking about careers for facilities management a key hook for a lot of people is to have a look at the different environments and different workplaces; and whether it be in a really high footfall shopping centre or a university, that sector over the ten and a half years at Integral went through a huge change in expectations of service delivery. The FM role within those particular environments and the experience of people was really, really crucial and the whole variety of the different types of places and buildings involved was fascinating.

300 North: What skills might be necessary for people to come into the FM industry at any level?

Mark: It really depends on what entry point you go in at. Not just in terms of level, but also what specialism. In terms of general skills, I think soft skills have really grown. I think the days of a non-communicative “I’m here, I know what I’m doing, leave me alone”, type of thing isn’t there anymore because you have clients who want to know what’s been done, want to understand the environments that they’re operating in.

If we look at what’s happened over the last couple of years with the pandemic, I’ve said more recently that the soft skills elements of managing people and being understanding to their general well-being has been really important as a key strength and skill set within the sector, as it is within many others, because the practicalities of trying to manage people remotely has been so challenging.

One thing I have mentioned in the past which is a slight bugbear to me, not just within facilities management but with wider industry, is the fact that people are put into management roles without any training to be a manager. I’ve had some absolutely brilliant managers that had empathy, cared and wanted to develop people, but I’ve also come across some really poor ones that didn’t have the skill sets to be a really effective manager. People assume they’ve got these natural personality traits that make a good manager or will learn them on the job, however you can’t assume that. It’s an evolving process and I think it’s really important that we understand that and provide training rather than seeing how we get on.

I think as well, although we’re not speedy adopters of certain things generally, in terms of technology and data, that is a really key skillset now. In my consultancy work we will still get clients sometimes that will say, “Well all my data is on a spreadsheet”, or “It’s in that folder behind me” and it’s not necessarily recorded within a CAFM system for example. But I think the way it’s going now is seeing the potential of technology like sensors and BMS systems and other stuff like that to be really data-rich, and then not just to have the data but actually to use it practically, to interpret it and then to formulate actions and efficiencies using that data. So now that data analytics piece is really important and I think whole kind of skill sets have developed around a need to do that.

300 North: How did you combat the challenges of the pandemic?

Mark: In terms of the pandemic and the challenges, I think eventually we’ll look back one day and think there were some good aspects of it, some pretty horrendous ones, but there were some good aspects.

Organisations were being agile and doing different things. I remember in the very early days we had 12 members of staff all working remotely and just to kind of keep the team bond together we had daily Spotify playlists that we'd share and everybody would delve deep into those and put different songs on.

We'd also do a weekly quiz and ironically we got to know each other better through our Guess Who quiz weekly. I'd put them together on a Friday morning and we'd get together for them. One time we had to do a drawing of a member of staff and you had to guess who'd drawn it and who it was, which sometimes was a challenge! There's fun elements of that, which a few months before we had no idea we would be doing those kinds of things, but were just helping to keep the team together.

300 North: Some people have said that the pandemic allowed them to bring more of themselves to work including talking more about their home life. How do you think hybrid workplaces and ways of working will continue to benefit people?

Mark: It's a very different environment to be managing workplaces and how that hybrid element of working affects people's experience of the workplace. We've had historical norms to say, "Right, you must work in the office because you won't be productive at home, there's too many distractions and you won't get up when you should do and you won't do the things that we need you to do". That whole myth has gone and people have proved that they can be productive at home.

People bringing more of themselves is a good point and that can include bringing your dogs in, which is one of the things I've done over the last couple of years along with a few other members of the team. There is the element as well of lockdown showing people that actually they can juggle things when given the flexibility.

There's a lot that's changed and a lot of opportunity for the FM profession. I talk about it with a lot of optimism because historically, since I've been involved in the profession, we've always talked about how we never have a seat at the boardroom table, nobody listens to us, we're not value added, and people only think of us as being there to unblock toilets or fix a boiler when it's cold in the office and things like that. This is the opportunity, now that we've got that audience, to show our contribution to the whole workplace experience. We can evolve the service delivery to include much more exciting workplace experiences for people and do the kind of things that we've talked about for years.

The pandemic has definitely raised the profile of FM and increased understanding of what we do, and for me it's a huge opportunity to get that message and understanding out there more. It can feed into people wanting to come into FM as a career of choice rather than, as we've talked about, for me and many others, falling into the profession because of circumstance rather than necessarily making a specific choice at a very early stage.

300 North: Describe your journey with IWFM?

Mark: When I joined Integral back in 2008 I had a blank canvas in terms of my business development activities. I was literally starting from scratch. I had a look at what networking type organisations or events I could go to to broaden my network of people within the FM profession and I tried a few. The first couple of IWFM events I went to were in the Merseyside region. One was Whiston Hospital and it was terrifying for me! I'm a natural introvert, and to go into a room of people I had never met before was daunting. The next one was at Liverpool John Moores University and was a lot more relaxed because it was in a smaller room.

Ironically they were talking a lot about social media and blogging and profile within the industry and that was a real catalyst for me. So those were small networking events within the region and those were 14 years ago that I first started.

It was maybe a couple of years after then I saw an advert on LinkedIn which was from the BIFM Lancashire group at the time. They were saying we're only getting about 4 or 5 people to attend events up here in Preston, could anybody volunteer to get involved? I thought well I'll give it a go, it might be a good opportunity to meet people and get to know them a bit more and step out of my comfort zone. I went up there, we had a chat, there were 4-5 of us in that room and we've kept in touch ever since. We said right, let's see what we can do to re-energize that group.

One of the criticisms at the time was FM is so London-centric, you want anybody to speak at your events, they're always in London - I just thought, so I'll invite them up. Let's talk about it, let's reinvigorate the community and let's get people coming up from London. So I started evolving those events within the Lancashire group and then within the wider North West group.

I wanted to engage with the membership so I'd send surveys every year to ask people to choose their top priority from a list of 20 themes for an event and use that feedback to drive the agenda for the next 12 months of events. After a number of years I was asked to be Deputy Chair of the North Region with looking after the North West because that was the progression really. I did that for a couple of years and then I was asked to be Chair of the north region and I did that for three years.

As a team we were really good and had some really good events. We had the North Region Ball which put us on the map for most within the FM profession, particularly in the North, as being a really great event which raises a lot of money for charity. I'd done that for three years and at the eleventh hour I noticed there were applications to become a non-exec director of the IWFM as regional chair and thought it's now or never really. I thought, I'll go for it and let others have the opportunity to run it from the regional level.

There was quite a number of applicants, and I was very fortunate to be shortlisted. Then I think it was five of us who went for election and I was fortunate then to get elected onto the board in July of 2019. I did the non-exec director role for two years which was really interesting, again volunteering. We do it in our own, as well as sometimes work time, but we do it for free and with the motives of trying to advance the profession.

Then last year I was asked by the board whether I'd be interested in becoming Chair; and at that time it was really felt it would be good to have somebody that had gone through that regional route, of volunteering and understands the regions membership. I'm not a person who has a fixed career path. I just try to get on and do things and hopefully prove what I can do through actions and results rather necessarily shout it from the hilltops so I was really flattered and honoured to be asked to be Chair. I was elected in July and took up role in October of last year and the last five months have absolutely flown by. I'm really loving it and I'm really genuinely humbled to be doing it.

I didn't think - to be honest with you - if I rewind back to that BIFM Merseyside event at Whiston Hospital that I'd be Chair of the Institute maybe 12-13 years later and I couldn't imagine that would be something that I'd be asked to do, so I'm very humbled and honoured to do it. But also understanding of the responsibilities.

I'm sorry if that's a long diatribe of the journey but I think it sometimes helps people understand that I've done the hard graft, I've done the stress, I've done the setting the alarm clock for six in the morning, going to events with the BIFM roller banners on my shoulders and a box full of brochures and then stressing whether people are going to turn up for the event or not, or whether the presentation's going to work, if the speakers are going to be there, and if people are going to enjoy it. I've done the hard yards in that respect over the years so I do understand what it takes and what commitments there are as a regional volunteer as well as a special interest group volunteer and what membership get out of being a member as well.

300 North: How is the IWFM celebrating National Careers Week?

Mark: The Rising FM SIG are a really passionate and great bunch of people that as a committee within IWFM are really keen and passionate to push FM careers forward. One of the things we are doing next week is going out to a school in London and hosting a day of mock interviews for the students which they haven't been able to do because of COVID-19 restrictions. I've got a morning of mock interviews with three students, and there's numerous members of the SIG and the wider volunteer community that are going to be doing them too, as well as giving careers advice. One thing I've learnt from doing it before with local students and schools is that it's really crucial to give the feedback to the young people and give them the steer. Careers days are really important to introduce students to industry and give business experience and teach what employers may be looking for.

We've got National Careers Week this week, and recently we've had National Apprenticeships Week as well and that mantra of banging the drum about careers in FM continues unabated regardless of whether it be a themed week or not. Even this afternoon we have an update call on the career of choice working group and the work we've been doing with the Class Of Your Own organisation that we've been collaborating with and how we can start getting some traction and doing some more activities with them in the schools running the Design, Engineer, Construct! course.

As part of my manifesto for the Chair role, I wanted to promote FM as a career of choice and a passion of mine I've had for a while now is to encourage young people into FM and getting that message out there to young people to say, "Have you ever considered going into the profession and potentially the opportunities and exciting things you could get involved in?" But also getting communities involved in those and keeping them updated on what we want to do is a key part of it too.

300 North: How can other companies and FM organisations support IWFM's work on education?

Mark: In terms of specifically FM careers and taking FM organisations: adopt a school. Or sponsor a school. That's a key part of it because when you look at the work Class Of Your Own have done for the students and young people that are on the Design, Engineer, Construct! course, FM is an element of that but FM really hasn't engaged historically with them. They've got a lot of Construction and Architectural companies that have recognised it's a talent stream for them. If we give the young people accessing this course practical experience of using software and designing things, we can see that their transition into a role with these organisations is much more seamless and less of a step up than if they didn't have that prior experience.

From an organisational point of view, when there is so much focus on social value and it's not just a metric now of how many apprenticeships you do, but also about your community involvement, the local benefits,

the social, economic, environmental benefits that you bring both to the local economy and to the community around you, it's a no-brainer in terms of being able to work closely with a school that are doing the Design, Engineer, Construct! course. You can help input into the curriculum, you can give awards, you can encourage young people, you can give work placements, and other things.

Prior to the pandemic we were doing workshops for the day with young people where there were facilities managers in the school for the day which was really well received. More recently I've done a lesson with a school up here - we talked about facilities management and also asset and lifecycle for a project they were doing. The insights we were able to give from a practical point of view were really good. So it's involvement in the curriculum as well as from volunteers that say actually for the sake of an afternoon I'll make contact with a local school and if they need me to come in and talk to them about what FM is or the insight I can give I'll do that and help to develop relationships with local schools running the Design, Engineer, Construct! course.

There's a lot of other things that we are looking at as well, because I think a key part of it is widening the career horizons of young people. You have to speak to young people and get the hooks in of interest for them, whether it may be because of the diverse nature of workplaces, or the elements of sustainability and how that can shape energy efficiency. It's getting them to the stage that they want to do the Design, Engineer, Construct! course, or do an apprenticeship, or decide on a career in facilities management and see career progression in doing IWFM Level 3, then Level 4 qualifications and onwards.

300 North: What would be your advice on how FM recruiters and other stakeholders can help to raise the profile of FM?

Mark: Insist that they are all members of IWFM would be a great start wouldn't it?!

On a serious point of view, I suppose in this moment in time this issue of being able to differentiate yourself from others within your applications, and being able to show career advancement and how you personally developed in terms of your skills, knowledge, and experience within your career. A lot of organisations are looking at that, they're also looking at how they may have progressed with their IWFM membership. Have they got that affiliate member certified status, or have they progressed on to fellow? I think advice in terms of recruitment and looking for the candidates, it's showing that breadth of experience and that learning and development is particularly important.

In terms of skill, it's such a dynamic environment out there, and I'm not going to try and predict where the skills might be in 3 or more years' time, but you know the way that technology is going, and you know the requirements of understanding data analytics and how that will make things more efficient. I think there's a lot of developments going to be coming as it becomes more cost-effective for organisations to adopt those and clients are asking more of their supply chain to be adopters of it as well.

I think people skills is an undervalued attribute that I think people have really got to evidence because you can say what you want on a CV about how greatly qualified you are, but it is all about how they approach going into an interview. I've done interviews and recruitment over the years and it still baffles me that somebody can come into an interview not having properly researched the organisation they're speaking to. Or they will apply for the role without really understanding the role and not adapting their CV or a covering letter to explain what qualities they could bring to that particular role. The key of being able to differentiate yourself is so, so important at the moment because there's a real fight for talent out there. As

well as retaining talent, it's attracting that talent and there's a fight on for the quality people in terms of your recruitment.

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