

300 North – Discussing the skills gap at The Facilities Show 2022

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FM recruitment firm 300 North was invited to the Facilities Show to discuss the skill gaps and shortages across the Facilities Management sector, how that would impact the industry going forward and what can be done to solve it.

The panel, titled “Turbulent Times: FM’s Best Upskilling Opportunity”, was chaired by Mark Whittaker (Chair, IWFM and General Manager, Thomson FM), and had Conrad Dinsmore (Head of Projects, CBRE), Sofie Hooper (Head of Policy, IWFM), Andrew Hulbert (Managing Director, Pareto FM) and Theresa Lamarque (Director of Strategic Partnerships, 300 North), as speakers.

The panel began with a statement from Mark Whittaker on the UK skills shortage, its cost (£6.3b according to the [Open University](#)), reasons for it (including the loss of borderless free movement after the sector’s reliance on it) and places where skills are most in demand in Facilities Management (including data analysis and technological know-how, green and soft skills). He then questioned the panel:

A two part question: In terms of the skills gaps, what are you seeing in the market with regards to specific skills gaps, and where do you see the real challenges? And secondarily, do you think this speaks to a people shortage as opposed to a skills shortage?

Conrad spoke to seeing a need in Heads of Projects and Project Managers to be able to interpret data and better understand dashboards and the technologies that comes with those things. There was a need, he thought, to really understand the skills of people and the skills needed for the role and tailoring job descriptions to fit those skills that you want in the business, both for that role, but also more generally.

Sofie gave the results of the IWFM Sustainability Survey which showed a clear gap in sustainability skills. She also saw deficits in soft skills in the sector, focusing on persuasion, communication and influencing, and looking into social value. The survey showed that whilst FM's do very well in regards to Energy, Waste, and Water Management, we are still lacking in Carbon Capture and Management, Air Quality management and improvement and effectively implementing circular economies in our businesses.

Andrew said they'd seen clear skills gaps in engineering roles after Brexit as many of these were filled by a skilled Eastern European workforce. There was agreement across the panel that skills needs had changed over the years and more rapidly now due to COVID, a point Andrew made by saying that at Pareto, engineers were expected as standard to have skills beyond their physical role requirements, including communication skills and the ability to liaise with clients, use technology and new software which exposed a barrier in that some engineers struggle to read or write.

Theresa stated that there was definitely a bit of both – as we all know, the recruitment market is currently candidate led, leading to fewer potential applicants for each position, and the people who do have the skills are in high demand. She is seeing skills gaps in soft skills in particular in the current workforce and would encourage companies to work on upskilling and reskilling in order to boost retention.

Mark then asked; as a profession we have recognition and great potential, yet we have an acute skills crisis. What can be done to tackle this challenge and do we need to look at defined career pathways within the sector?

Theresa noted that tackling the skills crisis required a whole of industry approach with all stakeholders coming together to provide solutions. The average age of FM professionals is over 50, and too many people are still falling into the sector, rather than choosing it a profession. We need to continue to raise the profile of the sector and find ways to entice young people in. 300 North have engaged with Uptree, a professional network that bridges the gap between young people and employers to bring young, diverse talent into the sector. Companies also need to be focusing on their onboarding and induction processes and including things such as buddying or mentoring systems that can help people to integrate into a company.

Andrew expressed his frustration that the sector had now been talking about FM as a “Career of Choice” for 15 years and it seemed nothing much had changed. In that regard, he explained that Pareto had created a strong apprenticeships programme which allowed them to foster new talent into the industry. Pareto have had particular success with the Kickstart Scheme, through which they took on 30 apprentices, including one in the audience. Andrew also pointed out that companies might not be using the apprenticeship levy to its full possibility and are therefore missing out on bringing in diverse new talent, amongst other benefits.

Sofie noted that IWFM were working to solve the challenge by working to influence the education lobby and putting out guidance for professional standards and best practice. She also said that one of the best ways they had found to engage young people and promote the sector was to put professionals into schools who can really engage with them on the sector and the issues it works to solve.

Conrad spoke of wanting to promote FM as an industry of choice rather than promoting it as a career of

choice as careers within the sector are so diverse and exciting that we should be shouting about the multiple pathways people can take. He also suggested companies should be investing in talent for their skills and potential, and how they will fit in the organisation rather than whether they fit an exact job brief.

Mark gave his own thoughts on bringing young people into the sector saying that he had found the hook for students he spoke to was in subjects that mattered to them such as sustainability, single-use plastics, waste and water management and carbon reduction. He saw that they wanted influence in the world around them.

Mark then went on to ask:

Each year the IWFM undertakes a sustainability survey highlighting the opportunities for the sector in sustainability which shows organisations intend to do good, however the actions are not always there. What are the key skill sets needed to strengthen this area and where will they come from?

Sofie suggested that this came down to both technical skills and soft skills. FM hasn't traditionally ruled in many sectors but sustainability is one of the places where FM can really come to the table and make meaningful changes, however the skills gap is a barrier for this, particularly in places such as carbon management, energy usage and understanding life cycle and the circular economy.

Conrad suggested that we needed a collaborative approach to assess what skills are needed and remember that every outcome is correct as long as we're making progress towards sustainability.

Andrew said FMs have long complained that there just aren't the people with the skill sets in sustainability, however there are now many people who have gone to university to study sustainability focused courses, so it's not that the skills aren't there, it's that we aren't yet attracting those people into FM. It's also about putting passionate people in place who can innovate on company sustainability policies and ideas to pull the sector forwards.

Theresa built on the soft skills piece that Sofie mentioned, saying it's about retention and bringing in that emotional intelligence needed on the managerial side and investing in your current talent pools.

Mark then went on to ask, how do we inspire young people to come into the sector?

To which Sofie replied, Just do it.

The final question from Mark to the panel was: What is your top tip for keeping your skills up to date?

Andrew encouraged everyone to take up the IWFM Level 1-7 qualifications with a hint of tongue in cheek. In seriousness, he said you could have two people with the "Facilities Manager" title with vastly different responsibilities and salaries, and the qualifications could help provide a benchmark across the sector. He also suggested companies should adopt flexibility and communicate with their employees.

Sofie's tip was to understand how people learn and to appreciate that they likely have less time available,

so making content easily digestible for them was important.

Conrad's tip was for people to plan the career they want. If they can see someone who has that career, communicate with them. Understand how they got to their position and see if you can replicate that pathway.

Andrew said, TikTok. Moving to where the young talent is and engaging with them where they are.

Theresa suggested coming to conferences and industry events, and networking, as well as engaging with the industry's press and staying up to date on current market trends.