

A cleaner, greener future: How Pioneer FM is redefining the cleaning landscape

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Pioneer FM's Mary Jane Pettit explains how the company's unique approach is challenging the cleaning industry's status quo.

In the facilities management sector, where pressure to deliver is high, margins are tight and the use of hazardous chemicals for cleaning sites is commonplace, most cleaning companies operate with a standard approach.

Work is hard, wages are often lower than other industries, staff turnover is high and the environmental impacts of toxic cleaning products can be damaging.

Pioneer FM, led by CEO and founder Mary-Jane (MJ) Pettit, is not your standard cleaning company.

The company is challenging the status quo of how cleaning companies take on the marketplace, bringing its values of people, partnerships and planet to the forefront of everything it does.

Rewarding hard work

Facilities Management is in MJ's DNA. Growing up in a household with a mother who worked as a cleaning contracts manager, and a father as both a plumber and school caretaker she saw first-hand the hard work involved in working manual labour jobs.

When she formed Pioneer FM, MJ recognised the efforts her cleaning staff put into their work and vowed to make Pioneer FM a Real Living Wage employer.

“The pandemic was in some ways a positive thing for the FM industry because it was the first time the cleaning staff ever got noticed. Because before then they weren’t ever recognised or rewarded beforehand. It was a thankless task.” MJ said.

Since it began trading in 2019, Pioneer FM encountered one of its most challenging periods in March 2023, following the news that a major cleaning contract to maintain the Brexit lorry parks had been awarded as a TFM contract, Pioneer FM had mobilised the contract and was already supplying the staff to the winning tenderer since December 2020, however after securing the contract they decided to take the cleaning in house, resulting in the TUPE of the majority of its staff.

This obstacle required a change in approach for the firm, as MJ explained:

“It was devastating and almost bankrupted us. But we didn’t let it define us. We dusted ourselves down, looked at how we could evolve and changed the way we worked. We changed our approach and began to target working in high-security clearance sites.”

High security, high standards

Taking a new approach of employing highly compliant, professional and committed cleaning professionals, MJ has developed an operational structure that means her teams are given the recognition they deserve. This has been a resounding success, resulting in the awards of prestigious cleaning contracts for some of the highest security sites in the country.

“We were the first company to do a Covid clean back in 2020 at all of the government sites for HMRC,” MJ explains.

“We also provided the government with all their hygiene stewards throughout the pandemic and supplied and mobilised all of the staff for all the Brexit lorry parks (which were built to deal with post-Brexit requirements for lorries to be checked what goods they bring in or take out of the country).”

Working on protected and high security sites requires Pioneer’s operatives to be Baseline Personnel Security Standard (BPSS) clearance checked and SC Cleared, a UK background check created to help reduce the risk of illegal workers and tackle identity fraud.

All of Pioneer’s operatives receive BPSS checks as standard, which has resulted in the business winning contracts with other high-security clients in the sector, including financial services, pharma and security & defence to name just a few.

Pioneer established a strong presence in the finance sector and currently manages contracts for GoHenry, the pension provider Pension Insurance Corporation, which helped the firm become a total FM provider. It is also the principal sponsor at Boreham Wood Football Club and a support partner for Wates, handling cleaning at secure sites such as Meta.

“We’re geared up to work with any companies that are FCA-regulated because of our background dealing with high-security sites. These clients love that they feel like they’ve got that extra layer of protection.” MJ explained.

People, Partnerships & Planet

In line with its company values, Pioneer FM pays at least the Real Living Wage to every one of its cleaning operatives, who are proudly referred to as 'Pioneers'.

The Pioneers are recognised for their efforts in this manual role, with regular staff health and safety training provided alongside offering employee engagement and reward programmes:

"We provide medical assessments for our staff, where they are given blood tests and if anything is flagged up they can see a private doctor at the company's expense," MJ said. "We want our people to feel rewarded for their hard work. It's a people-first approach and helps us maintain high levels of staff retention, which in turn provides our clients with a stable cleaning operation." She adds.

With Pioneer's environmental approach, MJ has pledged to make the firm carbon neutral by 2025:

"We've recently transitioned to an all-electric fleet, so our area managers travel in the country in brand new EVs. We're looking for a company to assess our emissions so that we can be confirmed as a carbon-neutral business."

Pioneer's cleaning approach aims to reduce the use of harsh, unnecessary chemicals, and only partner with clients who share these values, helping to reduce the impact the FM industry has on the planet.

MJ is an advocate of Lotus PRO, a powerful natural cleaning system that turns ordinary tap water into Stabilised Aqueous Ozone (SAO). SAO is a highly effective cleaning agent that breaks down dirt, grease and other contaminants, safely replacing traditional chemical cleaners, deodorisers and sanitisers. This approach helps Pioneer maintain its pledge of a 100% chemical-free cleaning service across all its sites.

An open-book approach

One of the key operating values Pioneer prides itself on is transparency. MJ says the firm operates with an open-book accounting approach, where clients can see how much suppliers charge for their consumables.

"We always make sure that we've got the right kit that needs to be on the site to deliver the contracts. We've turned away contracts that we don't think were the right fit for us. Every contract is completely tailored. We believe in building long-lasting relationships and will only work with the clients where we see a mutual benefit."

Other ventures

Beyond Pioneer, MJ has bold plans to cut out the middlemen in the FM industry, as one of the founders of Pioneering People, and the development of a new app which allows staff to choose which jobs they take on and be paid daily for their work.

"It's a matching engine, where the pioneer and destination are both vetted using the software. The destination 'employer' advertises a role in the app, the jobs are matched to the Pioneers 'employee' and they can choose the work they want. The money from the employer goes into escrow and the employee can be paid daily. It's all about helping staff in the FM industry get paid above the real living wage and helping the destination find the right people for their sites without paying agencies over the odds." She explained.

Building long-term partnerships

Looking to the future MJ says she is looking to make Pioneer more established in the sectors it operates in and to work with hard service providers to build future partnerships with.

“I think we’re seeing a real movement in the FM industry at the moment, where the bigger companies are buying up a lot of the smaller companies to secure national contracts, however, national companies are moving away from awarding Total FM contracts as they feel like they’re losing control, they prefer to split between Hard and Soft Services and have the companies work in partnership. We can offer Total FM services, but prefer to partner with established hard services providers and concentrate on soft services because that’s been our core offering since we started.”

“Ultimately, we want to keep working with companies that share our vision and build those long-term partnerships, whether that’s in the high-security environments or elsewhere.”

For more information on Pioneer FM and its services visit www.pioneer-fm.com