

1,000 Apprentices and Counting: How OCS is Professionalising the FM Frontline

4 hours ago



Sarah Williams, Chief People Officer at [OCS UK & Ireland](#), explores why professionalising the frontline through apprenticeships is the key to a resilient, people-led FM sector. Reflecting on the recent OCS Annual Apprenticeship Awards, she explains how structured learning transforms routine tasks into visible expertise for over 1,000 colleagues across the business.

Facilities Management is delivered by colleagues working on the frontline of contracts every day. Cleaning operatives, security teams, catering colleagues and engineers keep sites safe, compliant and operational, often outside standard hours and in changing conditions. Their decisions shape the customer experience in real time.

As buildings become more complex and services increasingly supported by data and technology, the demands on these roles continue to grow. Confidence, judgement and practical skills at contract level are now critical to service quality and resilience. This is where apprenticeships play a central role in how OCS is building the future of FM.

Recently, colleagues gathered at the OCS National Training Hub for our Annual Apprenticeship Awards. With more than 1,000 live apprentices across the business, the event offered a chance to reflect on what apprenticeships deliver day to day, across contracts and communities, rather than a celebration in isolation.

Confidence Starts Before Capability

For many colleagues, starting an apprenticeship is not about ambition or progression. It's about reassurance. Colleagues are expected to understand their site, follow procedures, respond to issues and

engage with customers from the outset.

Apprenticeships provide structure in that environment. Learning is paced, practical, and directly linked to the work colleagues already do. Skills are built step by step, with regular support from assessors and managers who understand operational pressures.

That structure builds confidence early. Colleagues begin to trust their judgement, ask questions and apply learning immediately on site. Over time, that confidence shows in safer working, clearer communication and greater consistency in how services are delivered.

Giving Language to Skilled Work

Many colleagues working on FM contracts already have deep expertise. They manage hygiene standards, monitor access and safety, prepare food at scale, maintain assets and respond calmly to incidents. Much of this skill is gained through experience and rarely labelled as such.

Apprenticeships help make that skill visible. They give colleagues the language to describe what they do, why it matters and how it relates to wider standards on quality, compliance and customer outcomes. This recognition changes how people view their role.

Colleagues often move from seeing their work as routine to recognising its value within the wider service. That shift fosters pride and professionalism, which in turn strengthens performance and customer confidence across contracts.

Learning That Fits Real Lives

Accessibility is essential. Frontline colleagues work shifts, manage peaks in demand and often balance work with family or caring responsibilities. Learning needs to fit around that reality to be effective.

Frontline apprenticeships are designed to be work-based and flexible. Learning takes place on site, using real tasks and challenges as the context. Managers protect time for learning where possible, reinforce new skills on the job and provide encouragement when confidence dips.

This approach is particularly important for colleagues new to work or returning after time away. Apprenticeships provide routine, support and a sense of belonging. Colleagues are not left to catch up alone. They are supported to rebuild skills such as communication, time management and digital confidence in ways that feel achievable.

Working Confidently Alongside Technology

FM services are increasingly supported by technology, from data-driven scheduling to automation and AI-enabled insights. For colleagues on the frontline of contracts, these tools can feel unfamiliar if introduced without support.

Apprenticeships build understanding and confidence. Colleagues learn why tools are used, how they support safety and quality, and where human judgement remains essential. Digital skills are developed alongside core operational capability rather than as a separate requirement.

Frontline colleagues are often best placed to see how technology works in practice. Through

apprenticeships, they gain the confidence to influence how tools are applied on site, shaping processes so they support rather than complicate service delivery. Technology becomes a practical enabler for people, not a barrier.

Progression Based on Choice, Not Assumption

Careers in FM take many forms. Some colleagues want to move into supervision or management, while others want to remain on the frontline of contracts and deepen their expertise in a specific role.

Apprenticeships support both paths. They strengthen core skills for colleagues who choose to remain in operational roles, while also developing capabilities such as planning, communication and decision-making for those who want to take on greater responsibility.

Success is defined by the individual. For some, it's greater confidence and pride in their work. For others, it's mentoring new starters, improving site standards, or progressing into a leadership role. Valuing deep frontline expertise alongside progression pathways supports retention and builds long-term resilience.

Strengthening Communities Through Practical Opportunity

Frontline apprenticeships also deliver wider social value. They provide accessible routes into stable employment within local communities, linked to real jobs and recognised qualifications.

By developing people from the communities where services are delivered, OCS strengthens local skills and supports long-term economic participation. Colleagues gain confidence, purpose and opportunity, while customers benefit from more engaged teams who understand their sites and surroundings.

This approach is practical and grounded. It focuses on building lasting capability rather than on short-term interventions. Skills developed on-site support both service quality and wider community resilience.

A Long-term Approach to People-led FM

As FM continues to evolve, service excellence will depend on colleagues who are confident, capable and supported to adapt. The frontline of FM contracts is where expectations are met, risks are managed, and quality is maintained.

Apprenticeships provide a foundation for that future. They strengthen confidence at scale, safeguard service standards and ensure people remain central as technology and operating models evolve.

By embedding apprenticeships into everyday contract delivery, OCS is investing in the people who make FM work. That commitment supports colleagues, customers and communities, ensuring facilities management continues to deliver environments where people and places can perform at their best.