

From Specification to Service: Creating Cleaning Models That Work in Practice

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By John McFetrich, Regional Account Director

John McFetrich, Regional Account Director at [Excellerate Services UK & Ireland](#), has worked across frontline and operational leadership roles throughout his career in facilities management, gaining experience across retail, manufacturing and corporate environments [is this true?]. In this article, he reflects on the ongoing challenge of creating cleaning specifications that truly reflect the realities of service delivery.

I didn't start my career in a boardroom. I started it on the front line, as a cleaner.

Since then, I've worked my way through operational leadership roles and that journey has taught me something the industry still struggles to fully acknowledge: no two sites are ever truly the same.

And yet, we still too often treat them as though they are.

The Problem with Standardised Specifications

Cleaning specifications are meant to provide structure, clarity and consistency. In theory, they define what "good" looks like. But in practice, they can sometimes become overly generic. Designed to fit everything and, in doing so, fitting nothing particularly well.

The challenge often begins at the bidding stage. Bid teams are under immense pressure: tight deadlines, competitive pricing expectations and limited resources. Even with support from operations, it is rarely feasible to visit every site in detail, particularly on large, multi-location contracts. The result? In some cases, we are effectively bidding blind.

When you do not fully understand the environment, the people, the footfall or the nuances of a site, the natural fallback is to create a standardised specification. It is safe. It is scalable. It ticks the box.

But it is rarely right.

Input vs Output Specifications

Layered into this is another complexity that is often misunderstood: input versus output specifications. On paper, the distinction is simple. In reality, it is anything but.

Output specifications are frequently attractive to clients. They focus on outcomes, what the environment should look and feel like, rather than dictating how many hours are required to achieve it. On the surface, this offers flexibility and places accountability firmly with the service provider.

What is often misunderstood is that priced hours are not a target, they are the operational model required to achieve the agreed standard. Within that model, it is the responsibility of operational teams to identify leaner processes, introduce innovation and continuously improve delivery.

Done well, this creates opportunity: improved standards, greater efficiency and the ability to reinvest margin into further innovation.

But that nuance is not always fully appreciated at the outset.

Without a clear understanding, output specifications can quickly become open to interpretation, particularly when layered onto a generic approach. Expectations grow, environments differ and the original assumptions made at bid stage are tested in real time.

Input specifications, on the other hand, bring a different set of challenges. They define the hours, the structure and often the tasks in detail. This can create a sense of control and transparency, but it also introduces rigidity. If the hours allocated do not align with the actual demands of the site, operations are left with a difficult question: how do you meet the expected standard with insufficient resource?

Again, we find ourselves back at the same point, trying to fit a round peg into a square hole.

The Operational Reality

Operational teams bridge the gap. Whether working within the perceived flexibility of an output model or the constraints of an input one, they are the people adapting, negotiating and, at times, firefighting. They become not just service providers, but problem-solvers, balancing client expectations, contractual frameworks and the reality on the ground.

Over time, adjustments are made. Processes are refined. Workarounds are introduced. The square hole is reshaped, piece by piece, until the round peg begins to fit. But this process can take months, even years, often spanning the life of the contract itself.

And just as everything begins to stabilise, the cycle starts again.

A new tender. A new specification. Another attempt to standardise what is, by its nature, highly variable.

A More Realistic Approach

This is not about criticism. It is about realism. The industry operates the way it does for understandable reasons: cost pressures, time constraints and the need for consistency across portfolios. But if we are honest, we must acknowledge that one size does not fit all and perhaps it never will.

So Where Do We Go from Here?

It starts with better understanding on all sides. Of what specifications truly mean in practice. Output models require trust, clarity and a shared understanding of what sits behind the price. Input models require realism, ensuring that what is prescribed can actually deliver the desired outcome.

Greater education and transparency across all parties would also help. During mobilisation and contract discussions, there is often alignment in principle, but not always a shared understanding of what input and output specifications truly mean in practice and the operational pressures they can create once delivery begins.

It also means bringing operational insight earlier into the conversation. Even when site visits are not possible, experience from similar environments can help shape specifications that are grounded in reality, not assumption.

Most importantly, it requires us to listen to the people delivering the service every day. They are the ones navigating these complexities, closing the gaps and ultimately turning a specification into a service.

Because cleaning is not just about hours or outcomes. It is about environments, people and expectations, none of which are ever truly standard.

The closer you get to the reality of service delivery, the clearer it becomes: no two environments are the same and successful cleaning operations should not be designed as though they are.

Turning Insight into Better Delivery

At Excellerate Services, we recognise these challenges because our operational teams experience them every day across diverse client environments and multi-site estates. Whether supporting retail stores, manufacturing facilities or corporate workplaces, we understand that every environment operates differently, with its own pressures, behaviours and service expectations.

That is why Partnership Matters

The most successful cleaning operations are built on open communication, shared understanding and a willingness to adapt as environments evolve. Strong operational delivery is not achieved through a static specification alone. It comes from continuously reviewing what is happening on site, listening to frontline teams and working collaboratively with clients to refine and improve outcomes over time.

Technology and data also have an increasingly important role to play. At Excellerate Services, we use operational technology and real-time data insights to support our frontline

teams, identify patterns across estates and better understand the unique challenges within individual sites. From auditing and performance monitoring to dynamic scheduling and service visibility, this allows

us to make more informed operational decisions and respond proactively as environments change.

Importantly, technology should never replace operational expertise. It should strengthen it.

When experienced people are supported by meaningful data and clear operational insight, cleaning specifications become far more than a document created at tender stage. They become living frameworks that can evolve alongside the realities of the environments they support.

The industry will always face pressures around cost, consistency and scalability. But by combining operational experience, stronger collaboration and smarter use of technology, there is a real opportunity to create cleaning solutions that are more realistic, more responsive and ultimately more effective for everyone involved.

Because better outcomes begin with better understanding.

John McFetrich is a Regional Account Director at Excellerate Services UK & Ireland with extensive operational experience across facilities management, having progressed through frontline and leadership roles supporting clients across multiple sectors.