

VIEWPOINT ARTICLE

My Path, My Perceptions, Our Future *A young professional's point of view*

As originally published in the January/February 2007 issue of the Facility Management Journal

“I was a team worker, a communicator, a manager, a planner, an innovator, an ‘outside-the-box’ thinker.”

I grew up a curious kid. I was always taking gadgets apart, putting them back together, and losing pieces along the way so the gadget still worked but not how it was intended. Still, that technical curiosity drove me all the way to college (somewhere along the way I learned that losing pieces was not a good thing). I applied to the School of Engineering at Cornell University and was accepted. My specific focus was civil engineering.

I made it through the first three semesters of classes without a problem. During the second semester of my sophomore year, I was taking a class called "Concrete and Steel." I know it sounds like an attention-grabber, but it was tough for me to really get motivated in that class. During one working session, the professor asked us to calculate stresses on reinforced dams with varying amounts of soil behind them, which is not as exciting as it sounds. He asked us to work individually on the problems.

As I looked around the class, I noticed that people were covering up their work, appearing paranoid that someone might copy off their papers. I felt really uncomfortable. I had the ability to solve these problems by myself, but I felt like a more efficient, more correct answer was possible by working in teams. About halfway through class, my professor stood up in front of all of us and said, "Well, for some of you, this is what you'll be doing for the rest of your life."

I couldn't risk that being a possibility. I enjoyed working with people too much. I stood up at the end of my class, walked out the classroom door, and made a direct line for my counselor's office. Of course I enjoyed the technical side of things, but I had a wider range of skills to offer. I was a team worker, a communicator, a manager, a planner, an innovator, an "outside-the-box" thinker. That's when I found the Facilities Planning and Management program at Cornell.

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The classes in the facilities degree track really interested me. They focused on the people aspect of buildings more than the actual nuts and bolts. There were technical classes as well, but the main focus of the program was the management of buildings, space and people.

After graduating, I returned to work at the same organization where I completed my internship (and have been employed there ever since). As an intern, I was very task-oriented. When given an assignment, I completed it as quickly and as well as I could. I felt like I had to prove my worth as an intern. When I came back as a permanent employee, my focus changed a bit. I still focused on performance, but I also focused on career advancement.

I started as an operations and maintenance specialist. Other parts of my department handled different aspects of facilities (move services, administrative services, mail services, etc.) Although I enjoyed working in operations and maintenance, I knew my degree program prepared me to offer a lot more. I took it upon myself to seek out new opportunities and find new challenges within my department. I sought opportunities that gave me experiences outside operations and maintenance. I worked with the space management team on upgrades, learned the department budget and how to prepare it, tracked costs, analyzed administrative services, and worked with customers on a daily basis while still primarily focusing on operations and maintenance.

Career development also occurred outside the workplace. I joined IFMA and volunteered for positions at local chapter, council and national levels. The education, experience and networking opportunities exposed to me were invaluable. I met other local facilities professionals that I could test ideas with, talk with about my experiences and look to for advice.

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To this point in my career, I have not had a "formal" mentor. I feel that my diverse needs and goals require specialized pieces of knowledge and advice from a wide range of people from different professions both inside and outside of my organization. Over the past four years, I have had informal "short-term" mentor relationships with no fewer than 15 people. Whether I was seeking professional or personal advice and guidance, I have been able to find someone to assist me with specific issues. It's tough to say whether one mentoring method is better than the other because they both have positives and negatives. A single formal mentor provides stability and consistency, but may pigeon-hole a mentee. Having multiple informal mentors provides a wider spectrum of input, but lacks close, special relationships. Regardless, any mentoring relationship works only if both people benefit. The mentee must realize they play a role in the process, that the relationship is a two-way experience.

Coming out of college, I was quite sure of myself. I assumed I could handle everything thrown my way. The most significant lesson I learned early on was that there is a learning curve in facilities management. Class work prepared me for what I might come across, however there are scenarios and situations that cannot be taught. I had to experience them first, find a way through them, and learn from that experience. That is a key reason that facilities certifications require a certain amount of experience as well as class work before being eligible. Learning and experience are two independent actions, although they feed off each other.

I learned in school that this profession is about communication and teamwork. Although I understood what my professors were saying, it hit me as soon as I started working. Facility management is a service industry. The purpose in any aspect of facility management is to provide the best, most efficient (cost and time) service possible. Whether coordinating a move, replacing a chiller, unclogging a toilet, or managing facilities assets, there is always a customer that has a need. Communication, listening and motivational skills are just as important as, if not more important than, technical knowledge.

“Quality service providers are often well known because when a client has a good experience with someone, they keep coming back to the same place.”

My first four years in this profession have been an incredible experience. I found immediately that facility managers are known by virtually everybody in their organization. Quality service providers are often well known because when a client has a good experience with someone, they keep coming back to the same place.

There are a large number of young professionals coming out of college with the knowledge it takes to be successful in this field. These young professionals have the same curiosity I have; the same need to look around, ask questions, find answers, solve problems and expand their knowledge base. After a few years providing service to clients in their organizations, they will become well known by most everyone in their corporations. Add that to their knowledge, experience, continual need to learn, and these young professionals are being groomed as the future leaders of the business world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Paul is a Consultant with Agile OAK LLC. In this capacity he is responsible for supporting client engagements in several key areas including operational assessments and benchmarking, market research, contract management and strategic sourcing. Paul brings six years of Facility Management (FM) experience. He most recently worked for EMCOR Facility Services, where he was responsible for analyzing building proposed organizational models for proposal responses. Paul was also responsible for the development and deployment of EMCOR's FM Benchmarking and Facility Assessment programs.

Paul is currently serving on the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) Board of Directors, working on an initiative to create and foster a sustainable environment within IFMA to engage, embrace, and empower the next generation of facility management professionals. He has the distinction of being one of the youngest professionals to receive the certification of Certified Facility Manager (CFM), and he was the first recipient of the Facilities Management Professional (FMP) designation.

Paul holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Facilities Planning and Management (Cornell University).

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