

## Best Practice: Is It More Than Just a Soundbyte?

Much is made of the need to meet or exceed “best practice” but what does it mean? Are people just paying lip service to the notion or are organisations really striving to be best in class? Tony Angel considers whether the drive to be “the best” is worth the hype or whether it’s just another fad.

We’re all busy, and getting busier. Clients and employers place increasing demands on our time, and the panacea of a work/life balance seems ever further away from reality. But working longer hours and at faster speeds doesn’t make us better at what we do. In fact, it’s even more difficult than ever to take stock as the constant grind of day-to-day activity takes its toll.

Prior to writing this article, I was reading an editorial in FM World by Cathy Hayward, and I’ll quote something that rang very true as I sat drinking a strong cup of coffee one very early morning. Speaking of the technological innovations that effectively mean we’re on line twenty-four hours a day, she asked “when (do) we get that opportunity to think strategically and do that blue-sky thinking...to revolutionise the way things are done?” We may all work at different levels and in different roles within our organisations, but one thing is clear. Facilities Management is essentially a *management* discipline, as the name suggests. And, as managers in this area of activity, our responsibility is to deliver efficiency, to identify opportunities to add value, and to strive to ensure that what we do supports the core business objectives of those around us. And, if we don’t know how well we’re doing, we can’t possibly know if we’re doing our job.

In recognition of this, there’s much talk of the dark science known as “best practice”. Or identifying, implementing or exceeding best practice, and of being “best in class”. To begin with, though, what does the term mean? The Department of Trade and Industry (which takes this issue very seriously indeed) doesn’t mince its words: **“Simply put, it’s about becoming more efficient, competitive and profitable... Best practice is based on the idea that the best way to learn is from the experience of others.”**

This means

- Measuring how well your business is performing
- Seeing where you need to improve and doing something about it
- Learning from how others have done it

And the benefits should be clear for all to see, and easily demonstrable as you:

- Become more competitive
- Reduce costs and become more efficient
- Improve the skills of your workforce
- Use technology more effectively



This sounds great, doesn't it? But if it's so simple, why aren't we all doing it? One of the stumbling blocks seems to be the notion that – whilst we might ourselves be within a certain sector or market – we can't possibly learn anything from organisations that trade or practice in a completely different market, with different drivers and constraints. However, I think this is quite wrong, because facilities management is no different to any other management discipline in that efficiency in certain key areas will inevitably result in better or enhanced performance. These include:

- Management
  - Leadership – developing and communicating a vision, taking people with you
  - Benchmarking – assessing the competition, knowing where you stand
  - Forecasting – planning tools, accurate reporting, responding to changing circumstances
  - Strategy – planning for success, developing and communicating strategy, relationship to core business
  - Finance – accounting practices, cash handling, systems, reporting, compliance
  - Business – corporate social responsibility, health and safety, statutory and regulatory compliance, market knowledge
- People
  - Managing people – getting the most out of staff
  - Working practices – new ways of working, culture change
  - Involving employees – engaging and empowering, communicating effectively
  - Diversity and equality – equal pay & opportunities, recognition of skills and experience
  - Training and skills – developing staff and skills, assessing training needs
- Operations
  - Quality management – introducing QM, tools for measurement and improvement
  - Managing information – collating data, analysis and reporting, using MI effectively
  - Supply chain – procurement processes, relationship management, performance measurement
  - Outsourcing – supply option appraisal, tendering, partnering
  - Innovation – unlocking creativity, encouraging ownership, promoting a culture of change
  - Product development – understanding customer needs, adopting a consultative approach, seeking continuous improvement
- Communications and IT
  - Cabling, network management, wireless and remote access
  - Integration – linking systems and processes, data management, LAN/WAN design & development
  - Applications – business & reporting tools, email clients, internet access, intranet/extranet, e-procurement
  - Security – data security/integrity, hacking, viruses, firewalls, authentication



- Communications – ICT, VoIP, call handling/management, call routing, help desk, telefixing, tele/video-conferencing, remote monitoring

Not only are these issues for all FM functions and FM service providers, but isn't it true that for the most part they're also issues for any organisation operating in the commercial arena? And, however well we think we're doing them, how can we really know unless we have an understanding of what others are doing, and how they're doing it? As a case in point, I recently presented my views of the future direction of FM to a potential client that had gone to the market with a view to outsourcing what was at the time a largely in-house function. A number of service providers were similarly presenting, and at the end of a relatively tough half-day of discussion and debate I was told by the client panel that "We think we're excellent at what we do. We want to see if there's a better way, and then take an informed view of whether we need to rethink our strategy or not."

Now, whilst the opportunity was not quite as sold at the outset of our involvement, I had to recognise the sense in taking stock first and making decisions afterwards. And on this occasion it meant seeking intelligence from the market as part of a benchmarking exercise. In other words, of doing just what the DTI suggest – learning from the experience of others. Inherent in the process is benchmarking, which is itself a topic for another article. But suffice it to say that if we don't benchmark what we do, we will never successfully engender a culture of continuous improvement. And I do have strong views about benchmarking as an activity, which are based around the obsession with cost benchmarking to the exclusion of understanding and focussing on process. Because, of course, if the process is right the chances are that the output will be right too.

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### About Edifice

Edifice is an independent consultancy providing objective, intelligent advice on the management of facilities and property in support of core business objectives. Working closely with its clients it provides solutions that are flexible, sustainable and – most important – appropriate to business needs. Blue chip clients include Cable & Wireless, Microsoft, WPP Group, United Business Media, O2, Iron Mountain, and Sainsbury's.

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