

# Selecting a Facilities Management System

As effective as property or estates management systems are, the fact that they concentrate on lease contracts and finance means that, at first glance, they are not the most attractive or interesting use of a computer.



In comparison, facilities management (FM) systems can seem spectacular. They store information about occupied space, sometimes with 3-dimensional drawings. They use these drawings to allocate costs and rents across entire portfolios. They have graphs showing maintenance costs throughout the life cycle of a building and they demonstrate spending across portfolios. Few estates management (EM) systems can match them for this sense of showmanship.

Many estates managers, when asked what sort of systems they need, quote functionality which is commonplace in facilities systems but rare in estates systems. This is partly because so few estates managers use FM systems and therefore believe that this functionality would help. It is also because in-house estates managers believe that they should concentrate on strategy, leaving mundane work to outsourced service providers, and the graphical information presented by FM systems appears easier to work with than lists of figures.

Reality requires a combination of many types of information in many different forms and, in fact there is no clear distinction between EM and FM in any part of the world other than the UK. This means that the first place to start in selecting an FM system is to define our terms.

When you decide to select and implement Facilities Management (FM) software you will face many of the same issues as when selecting real estate management software but there are often additional complications in the FM field because of the level of outsourcing in this discipline. This article considers three basic areas: Functionality, Do you need a full FM System, Implementation issues.

## 1. Functionality

We have heard definitions of FM which range from providing IT systems through to designing racking for warehouses. All had profitable business models for their chosen market but, confusingly, all use the same title.

For most property people, EM and FM will be two sides of the same coin. The EM team will look

after the buying and selling of buildings, the management of leases and the rent, service charge and insurance of the actual properties.

The FM team will be responsible for repairs and maintenance, space planning, move management, health and safety and technology relating to the buildings (from lifts and HVAC to wireless networks).

Every software supplier will want to "wow" you with the latest gizmos available - object-oriented software; communication with Blackberries; touch screen technology, etc. It is very easy to get carried away!

As with all system selections think about what your business processes first. What do you actually need to control as core functionality? Understand what you are going to do, who is going to do it and the business benefits you expect to derive from a system then test that core functionality before thinking about the add-ons.

When thinking about the business benefits, consider what you might want to offer your clients (whether in-house or external) as services in 2 years time and the best way to achieve that. For example, will you need to control building systems centrally with remote monitoring, or install functionality on the company intranet so that users can decide their own building temperature or report problems with the cleaning? If you have an international business, you may need to think about other system issues including language, currency, localisation or health and safety issues.

## 2. Do you need a full FM system?

The functional footprint of most FM systems is vast and it is best to prioritise the areas to be implemented first. The easiest way to do this is to consider the balance between what will be done in-house by a usually small client team, and what can be effectively outsourced to a service provider.

### The client with outsourced services

The first consideration is whether you need an FM system of your own at all. If you only need to notify the contractor of ad hoc maintenance requests or use a system for booking rooms, taxis and cups of tea, you may not need the expense of a system which holds details of the next scheduled boiler overhaul, complete with plans and specifications. Could you just use your service provider's tools through a web-interface? The benefits of this approach are:

- The service provider absorbs the cost and difficulty of installing a system initially and of its maintenance and regular upgrades;

- Your service level agreement (SLA) can be defined to monitor available access to the system;
- In theory, if your service provider has other contracts, your contract price should be lower as the service provider can benefit from economies of scale;
- The management information you need, which is at a more strategic level than the detail within an FM system, can be imported from your service provider to your EM or Accounting system.

There are however, some disadvantages to this approach:

- If the FM system is outside the company there can be issues with the maintenance of the interface, the reconciliation of data within two systems, and the additional SLA clauses necessary to ensure that the service provider is updating their system to give you your required data;
- Who owns the data? There should be appropriate arrangements in the original SLA but getting your data back in the format you require to pass on to a new contractor is often a complex task;
- What if you have multiple contractors? You may need web-links to half a dozen contractors on your PC. It may also be difficult to ensure that all the contractors have the same base information. For example, the contact details which an office worker may have to supply to order catering or a new light bulb may be the room number and his telephone extension which would be held in a database for the service provider to select from to minimise data entry. Failure to ensure that changes to this central database are updated by all your service providers will significantly affect service levels and reports.

#### The outsourced service provider

The service provider's requirements from a system may be more far-reaching.

If you have a large number of operatives and have multi-site responsibilities, you may wish to consider systems which work with hand-held devices in the field which can save significant time and effort over traditional data capture methods.

The arguments for and against the service provider owning the system rather than the client are more or less the inverse of those listed above and the debate on this continues. However, there are a couple of additional considerations:

- A major service provider working over different sites but using the same operatives,

can be much more efficient by channeling all requests for ad hoc maintenance through one system;

- It will be far easier to budget human and financial resources if one system contains details of all commitments. For example if two clients have a requirement for window replacement in the same time period, there may be bulk buying advantages both for materials and sub-contractors;



- The service provider's system will also give a more detailed understanding of cost information. For example, a fixed contract for service provision to client A using their FM system, may not record detailed time and cost information about specific jobs which will be useful to future contract negotiations.

As ever, service providers who make an early commitment to a system and implement it effectively will have the upper hand in negotiations with a client in respect of its use. Many clients are quickly investing in technology to ensure that this does not happen.

### 3. Some implementation issues

The devil is in the detail! Implementation always takes longer, and costs more, than anticipated! Think about the key questions up front:

- Do you want your own server or do you want an ASP solution? If in-house will you require additional IT staff to look after it?
- Does the system need to be web-enabled? If so, true web-enablement or Citrix?
- Think carefully about data entry. Who will enter all the data to schedule repairs in block A3 in 15 years time?
- Who will use the system and how much training do they need? Lack of user training is one of the key reasons for systems failing to produce anticipated benefits.

There are many fantastic FM solutions on the market for businesses ranging from a single site to global corporations.

But before you make a decision make sure you can answer the question: -

What business benefits will I derive from buying this type of software and which of the available products will help me derive those benefits most cost-effectively?

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**Those who  
implement  
systems well  
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upper hand in  
negotiations.**