

Delivering a consistent service across boundaries

Ian Fielder summarises the discussions at a recent Global FM workshop that focused on the challenges and opportunities created by international service provision.

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The ninth Global FM International Workshop was held in London on 13 April, hosted at the annual conference of the British Institute of Facilities Management (BIFM). Global FM's chairman, Steve Gladwin, led the workshop, which centred on the topic of "Working across boundaries – the FM challenge in an advancing world", thus tying in neatly with the overall conference theme of "FM in a changing world".

THE CHALLENGE

In a rapidly growing trend, many client organisations are reducing their number of suppliers and issuing contracts with a wide geographic spread, covering an increasing number of FM services. One of the key issues facing FM professionals today, therefore, is the challenge of delivering consistent services across boundaries, whether that means between different cities, regions, states, countries or even continents.

Client organisations demand a guaranteed service level that can be understood, monitored and communicated. This is putting increasing pressure on the relatively few suppliers who aim to provide an international offering and provide a comprehensive service across boundaries. To help address this issue, software suppliers are providing an array of IT solutions that can manage data consistently to help both clients and FM suppliers.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Dave Wilson, director of Agents4FM, an international group of FM specialists, set the scene with a thought-provoking presentation on cultural diversity. For him the issue is all about perception and preconceptions: "Value judgments based on large groups are of no use when dealing with individuals. Yes, behaviour is partly determined by culture, but personality plays a big part."

An individual's behaviour will depend on their social class, education, gender, age, beliefs and local culture, as well as their national identity. All these factors will help to shape a person's personality and whether they are assertive or polite, for example, rule bound or risk taking, respectful or challenging – it is too simplistic to attribute these behaviours to national stereotypes.

The cultural barriers that facilities managers need to overcome are to do with their own lack of knowledge,

Wilson said – of local regulations, processes, daily routines, civil norms and foreign languages.

There appears to be a huge problem with centrally driven procurement exercises that only focus on the potential cost savings that may be achieved through a global contract. If the delivery model does not recognise the local culture, problems ensue and failure to deliver a successful contract can often be the result. Gaining buy-in from the whole client community and involving user representatives in the procurement process can overcome the many teething problems encountered if a central approach is adopted. "Cultural diversity is a reality – but it's not an excuse," Wilson explained.

Wilson asked the workshop delegates to imagine themselves working in a strange environment and what strategies they might adopt to acclimatise themselves to an unfamiliar culture. He argued that if we adapt to the local culture, this gives us a greater understanding of things that work differently from our own experience.

TECHNOLOGY TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES

Steve Jones, national sales manager at Qube Global Software, the workshop's headline sponsor, argued that technology is transcending boundaries. The user interface and expectations of self-service are key components of this trend.

Do international clients want consistency across borders, delegates were asked. Yes, said Palle Esbensen of ISS, an FM services provider with operations in 53 countries and one of Global FM's 2010 sponsors. Others were not so sure, saying that this might be the view from the chief executive or chief financial officer, but that it was unlikely to meet the needs of a local workforce. In the lively debate (peppered with anecdotes of cross-cultural experiences) the group was divided on whether technology will standardise cultures, although all agreed it would be regrettable if diversity were to be eroded.

During the debate, the delegates also considered whether English would continue to be the accepted business language or if Spanish, Portuguese or Mandarin will dominate. IT will play a major deciding role as software solutions are used across borders but generally they employ American English as standard.

Jones highlighted another issue arising from the shortfall in employees' skills and used the UK as an example. The fall in the birth rate following the baby-boom era has led to a shortage of 35- to 45-year-olds with the skills that employers seek. This has created a gap in the market that is allowing computer-literate younger people to push for jobs that traditionally might have been

seen as too senior. This trend is replicated across the globe but is not uniform. This is encouraging people to migrate, taking their skills and culture with them.

CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITIES

My own contribution to the debate was to suggest that the word not used so far was "community". I argued that all diversity issues could be transcended by observing younger people's culture and the ease with which they build networks, for example via LinkedIn and Facebook. Changes are evident within the BIFM, as members are more inclined to build a community of interest with like-minded people than to support a geographical bond.

Another aspect of social networking is that people now have a different view of their community and build huge networks through social media sites. Often individuals have no idea of the ethnicity or background of their social group and it is of no interest to them. If the diversity of opinion in the room was anything to go by, there is certainly no danger of cultural conformity in FM just yet.

Dani Kolb of Global FM's Secretariat and a senior consultant at Kellen Europe, a professional services firm, highlighted the fact that today it is common practice for young people to study and work in different EU member states. This mobility has broken down boundaries and will probably do so even more in future. Her personal experience was that at university she shared accommodation with students from 11 different European nations and this promoted both diversity and working across boundaries. These students have now distributed themselves across the globe and remain in contact through a strong varsity network.

Another interesting view was offered by Jozsef Czerny, founding chairman of the Hungarian Facilities Management Society. He maintained that FM is a tool to help transcend boundaries and he believed that the growth in international collaboration in FM has helped him build links with the Hungarian government. His one regret, however, was that many of his colleagues and other facilities managers from the former eastern European bloc could not contribute to what he considered an excellent debate because of the cost of travel to the UK.

SUCCESSFUL SERVICE DELIVERY

In his presentation looking at a supplier's perspective on delivering cross-boundary solutions, Iain Murray, managing director of FM service provider Connected FM and chairman of the BIFM, reflected on his experiences being brought up in Scotland, and working across the UK and abroad. A good specification supported by a clear contract will be the fulcrum by which a quality supplier can deliver a service across boundaries as long as the contractor works hard to understand the local culture. Service levels and key performance indicators across a client's portfolio may be varied but, as long as all parties are aware of the fact, then there should not be issues around service delivery.

One issue that Murray felt had still not been addressed was cross-border payment. He did not see any practical

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

According to Agents4FM's Dave Wilson, success in a culturally diverse environment comes when you can:

- be confident without arrogance;
- listen without blindly accepting;
- judge without being judgmental;
- compromise without losing your values; and
- succeed without the need to win.

resolution to this problem, even in Europe, as long as the UK remains with sterling.

"Organisations that do not use virtual teams effectively may be fighting an uphill battle in a global, competitive and rapidly changing environment," said Stan Mitchell, former chairman of Global FM. He conjectured that successful organisations have employed new ways of working across boundaries through systems, processes, technology and people. "Understanding how to work in or lead a virtual team is becoming a fundamental competence for people in many companies," he added.

In the debate that ensued, it was suggested that virtual teams are often formed as a reaction to a business requirement or as a result of new ways of working. It is not uncommon to talk to people who lead or work in virtual teams who do not have a great deal of experience working on teams in a co-located environment. People who lead and work in virtual teams need to have special skills, including an understanding of human dynamics, knowledge of how to manage across functional areas and national cultures, and the ability to use communication technologies as their primary means of exchanging information and collaborating.

GLOBAL COOPERATION

In summing up the event, Global FM's Steve Gladwin highlighted the positive outcome of the workshop and the lively discussion: "Thanks to a diverse audience, we were able to share our views on the challenges that new information technologies and communications are posing to the FM profession, companies and associations. Global FM is a living example of how to work and cooperate across boundaries."

"Another example of how Global FM is collaborating across boundaries is World FM Day," he added. "Last year the inaugural World FM Day was celebrated across five continents, with events ranging from lunch debates to soccer tournaments to twitter discussions. This year World FM Day will be on 24 June and our members are organising events on this day. We are optimistic that individual facilities managers, FM teams and FM companies will use World FM Day as a way of promoting the strategic value that FM brings to many organisations."

The next Global FM International Workshop, which will be part two of the debate on working across boundaries, will take place on 26 October in Atlanta, prior to the International Facility Management Association's World Workplace conference. **FM**

INFORMATION
To learn more about World FM day or to organise an event, go to globalfm.org/world_fm_day.asp.