

The Search for Experienced Facilities Personnel

Finding experienced facilities managers is a growing challenge that requires a targeted strategy.

By Tom Blackwell



won't have the relevant experience we'll need in our business.

Outsourced or Insourced?

Building operations can't be outsourced overseas, of course, but some districts have turned to local outsourcing. Although this strategy has often been fraught with problems, it continues to be of interest to many districts because these companies can show a PowerPoint presentation that indicates significant savings, especially in the short-term. In today's financial landscape, that's an attractive benefit to school systems.

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Of course, the problem is this: A private company can afford to pay its employees a nice salary and all the benefits that go along with it by supplying fewer services than were originally supplied by the district's employees. An increase in services, processed through expensive change orders, results in a higher cost to the school district—sometimes increasing expenses above and beyond the cost of having a district employ its own facility personnel.

On the other hand, if services are *not* increased, in a few short years the district will awaken to facilities that are in much worse condition

The facilities management profession is in desperate need of qualified and experienced people who are willing to work in a community environment of collaboration and cooperation.

Building systems are becoming increasingly more complex and the number of qualified personnel to

design, construct, and operate them is shrinking as a result of retirements and a deficit in the number of personnel entering this field. The whiz kids who are graduating from college today are drawn to the salaries and glamour of high-tech and don't mind being laid off and switching companies every four years until they're 40. And at that point they



than they would have been otherwise, and they will be less able to afford the solutions.

Competing Priorities

A related factor involves the competition for funding between instructional programs and facilities. Now, most certainly, instruction must always trump facility considerations, but when facility conditions inhibit instructional functions, something must be done. When many large school districts report over a billion dollars of repair backlogs (often referred to as deferred maintenance) just to return them to full functionality, one must wonder if they will ever catch up.

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The optimal solution is early intervention: Having district leaders who are willing to launch a facilities education program to rally support of voters, board members, and legislators, and to make the bold and

perhaps ostensibly unpopular decisions about facilities maintenance and management before it is too late or too expensive to “fix” the problems.

Tapping Talent

Districts that are fortunate enough to have a highly trained technical facilities staff find that they are also training consultants, contractors, vendors, and service contractors about their specific systems, and often those companies (including consultants) aren’t adequately training their own employees. How often have we been in meetings regarding a complex renovation project where the solutions are proposed by the district personnel rather than by the other “experts” on the team?

My approach to ensuring effective facilities management is to target a small number of promising employees (those who have the potential, desire to learn, and willingness to work to advance) for mentoring. Yes, we may lose some of them to other businesses, but we’ll retain some (particularly when there is a

recognized career path) and we are bettering the Industry as a result. In my experience, the best demographic group to tap for facilities management is people who have an intrinsic work ethic that doesn’t need to be taught or enforced.

Another possible solution to the lack of qualified people entering this field after graduation is to offer internships to college juniors and seniors in relevant technical degree programs who are interested, capable, recommended by instructional staff, and willing to work. (The “relevant technical degree program” situation in the United States is also unfortunately problematic: There are five countries ahead of us with respect to their percentage of college graduates in engineering studies (in descending order): Japan, Germany, Mexico, France, and Canada.) This intern period gives the district the opportunity to see how the student would work, while affording the student technical training, work environment experience, and an income.

This “trial period” is invaluable for both parties to see if there is a possible fit in the future. Of course, to retain them as full-time employees, the district will need to offer them a desirable career path as well as a progressive, commensurate salary.

Although this situation may appear as daunting as solving world hunger, its solution will be essential to the continuation of our business. Without serious, short- and long-term solutions, we will continue to witness the gradual decline of qualified personnel and, consequently, the continual worsening of our facilities’ conditions.

Tom Blackwell is engineering manager of project management and construction services at the University of Texas Austin campus. He is former director of construction and facilities at Leander ISD in Leander, Texas. Email: blackwelltp@gmail.com