

“Facilities management providers are perfectly placed to lead change.”



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David Cameron once attempted to introduce the idea of defining a nation's standing based on its wellbeing as opposed to gross domestic product performance. It was a radical idea, since wellbeing has traditionally been linked to economic prosperity. But as we all know, money does not buy you happiness.

Now that the courts have ruled against expansion plans for Heathrow Airport, it seems that economic growth per se is no longer the priority for the UK. If the new focus is on wellbeing, then what does this mean for facilities management?

Facilities management providers are perfectly placed to lead change. We should be advising our clients – landlords, tenants, owners, developers and public bodies of all types – about the best way to enhance the workplace and the lives of the people using the space. However, FM still tends to be reactive – attempting to meet the immediate demands of customers rather than innovating and strategising.

FM needs to take a stand. Faced with a climate emergency, growing customer expectations and rapid technological advances, we need to rethink our whole approach to delivering services.

The wellbeing of our customers – the occupiers of the facilities and workplaces we maintain – is, of course, a priority. They need to be healthy, engaged and productive so that they can focus on their core jobs. However, it can't be at the cost

of our environment. We need to ensure that modern working conditions and prosperity are compatible with environmental protection.

Organisations tend to look through a stakeholder lens that is too narrow, too caught up with worries about turnover and margins to appreciate the bigger picture. A wide-angle focus would allow all of us to see we have a much more important stakeholder: the Earth itself.

That's an ambitious statement. But we should all stop a moment and consider the impact of what we do each day as individuals. Small steps do make a difference if enough people take them. And as FMs, there's a lot we can do to ensure our services are delivered in a way that makes a difference to our planet's future. Wellbeing for people can equal wellness for the planet – but only if it's done right.

A planet under stress

We are living in a geological age called the Anthropocene. Scientists define it as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on the climate and the environment. That means it's our responsibility as a species to take care of our world.

Our planet is an amazing thing. It boasts tremendous diversity in species, habitats and cultures; but our way of life has tested its resilience to breaking point. Some might wonder if the planet wouldn't be better off without us. The Earth has faced down and adapted to countless climatic changes and

planetary events – but it may have met its match in the damage wrought by the human hand.

Human activity has changed 77% of the land and 87% of the oceans, mostly not for the better. Earth Overshoot Day marks the date when humanity's demand for ecological resources in a given year exceeds what the planet can regenerate in that year – and that date approaches fast each year.

Our consumption is out of control. For example, domestic pigs and cows outnumber all wild animals by a ratio of 14:1 but raising them accounts for 83% of agricultural land – while their meat provides only 18% of our calories. The signs of a planet under stress are everywhere: ocean acidification, deforestation, air and water pollution, flash floods, forest fires and, of course, global warming. Earth is near burnout. It can't process the toxins we're pumping into it or replace its depleted resources. Something has to change. Setting targets for zero carbon, biodiversity net gain, and supporting the circular economy are all vital responses – and this is where FM can make a difference.

Our responsibility to act

Facilities management occupies a significant place within the UK economy. Our industry is worth some £64bn, representing about 7.5% of UK GDP. At the same time, we are part of an industry which has a disproportionate impact on the environment. The built environment sector is responsible for 40% of CO2 emissions, 60% of water use and 60% of waste generated in the UK.

This means we in FM have a responsibility to do what we can to improve our procurement and operational practices to reduce this impact.

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2020 shows for the first time that the top five risks are environmental. We may not be able to do anything about extreme weather or natural disasters, but we can make our services more environmentally friendly.

Meat eating, for example, has a huge effect on climate change. We can help by providing non-meat options in our catering provision. We can reduce air and water pollution by outlawing use of toxic chemicals in our cleaning services. We can reduce waste by encouraging recycling and reuse. We can promote biodiversity in the open spaces we care for through judicious planting, habitat protection and the creation of 'green corridors' to encourage wildlife.

Clearly, actions that benefit the planet also benefit people. A stable climate, reduced pollution, flourishing green spaces and healthy menus are all positive outcomes. But wellness goes beyond our ecological footprint. It's about how we feel – and how we live.

What is wellness?

Wellness is the sum of everything that affects and touches us: our mental and physical health, our life expectancy, our social and economic engagement with each other, our connections with nature. Our feelings of contentment. Our happiness.

Profit and the acquisition of wealth is still widely regarded as the most important measure of success. Yet in terms of happiness, the US –

economic powerhouse, home of the American Dream – ranks only 108 out of 140 nations. The UK does better at 34, but it's still not good enough.

Wellness eludes many of us, and work is a big part of the problem.

We're increasingly recognising that culture and relationships in the workplace have a huge impact on how we feel. We thrive when our employers show they value us, when we can socialise with colleagues and feel part of a team. We feel engaged when our organisation demonstrates respect for the environment and the surrounding community. We like to know we are part of an enterprise that is doing the right thing.

FMs wrestling with shrinking budgets, complex stakeholder demands and growing compliance pressures might feel they have little time and energy to spare for ethical considerations. But now is the time to rise to the challenge – because our customers as well as the public at large are looking for leadership.

Ethical actions are valued as never before. An organisation perceived to be acting with integrity is far more likely to be trusted than one focused on short-term balance sheets. The public will warm to companies that treat their people well, that support their local communities and take the environment seriously. They will distance themselves from those perceived to be profit-hungry, who squeeze margins at the expense of employees' welfare, who consume without thought, who procure at lowest cost regardless of consequence.

A plan of action

The good news is that many business leaders do care about the

wellness of the planet and the wellbeing of people, and so do the occupants of the buildings we manage.

Small, piecemeal improvements of the kind described above have their value. But in order to bring about real, lasting change, we need a strategy.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are a good place to start. In 2015 17 SDGs were created along with 169 targets. SDG 3 specifically targets wellbeing. These goals need to be integrated into all our industry practices. This will require commitment and a shift in behaviours and values.

One suggestion is to move to Net Positive – a new way of doing business that contributes more to society, the environment and the economy than it takes out. Organisations that take a Net Positive approach are still intent on growing their brand, achieving a strong financial performance and attracting the brightest talent. But they recognise that business is a marathon, not a sprint, and that their activities have an effect far beyond organisational boundaries. They understand that they are connected to their communities and the wider world, and that their success is intertwined with the wellbeing of this extended community of stakeholders.

For over 2,000 years people believed that the Earth was at the centre of the universe. Today we know that humans are not central to the wellness of the Earth – but the wellness of the Earth is central to our wellbeing. VINCI Facilities is focused on ensuring that even as we grow our business, we are never less than a trusted custodian of the planet.

Reference links:

Responsible Business Toolkit

<https://www.rics.org/uk/news-insight/latest-news/value-the-planet/>

Sustainable Facilities Management Index

<https://www.acclaro-advisory.com/sfmi/>

Green Finance Initiative

<https://www.greenfinanceinstitute.co.uk/>

BITC Wellbeing Resources

<https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/an-introduction-to-wellbeing/>

World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2020

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2020>

UN Sustainable Development Goals

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>