

The studious route to top marks

The BIFM Award for Student of the Year, sponsored by Land Securities Trillium, is presented each year to the student who achieved the best performance during their work towards the BIFM Qualification. In 2004 the award was presented to two students who achieved the same results and were named as joint winners. They were Michael O'Reilly, who works for the Ministry of Defence, and Alison East, who started working in facilities management just three years ago and is now a facilities manager working for Genworth Financial managing sites in the UK and Europe.

Here, Alison East discusses her rapid induction to the world of facilities management and how working for the BIFM Qualification has helped her pursue her career goals.

"Most people we know 'fall into' facilities management. It's very rare you come across somebody who actually set out years ago to become a facilities manager – I certainly didn't. I had never even heard of facilities management until I got my first job as a facilities assistant. I enjoy variety and thrive under pressure, so when the recruitment agent called and explained the role it sounded like the job description had been written for me.

I decided I wanted to do a formal qualification in facilities management, so that I would be able to demonstrate both a practical knowledge and a theoretical understanding of all the competencies in facilities management, not just ones I would come across at the organisations I would work with and for.

To be honest, at that point I didn't completely understand what facilities management was, even when I went for the interview, but I got the job.

So that's how I started off my career in facilities – in a small in-house facilities department at a public relations company, where I learned a lot about what facilities management entails and had my first taste of planning office moves, managing refurbishments, catering, maintenance and running a helpdesk.

Along with a lot of other companies in 2001, the PR firm was making many changes, redundancies were rife, costs were being cut, and as a result I was moved to spend half my day acting as the receptionist. I left shortly after this development to join a facilities services provider,

managing the facilities helpdesk on a prestigious five-building contract for a Bank in the City of London.

JOB SATISFACTION

In this role, I was managing the helpdesk on a CAFM system that left more than a little wanting. The system was great – or could have been had it previously been managed and used to its full potential. This role was different for me as I was now deskbound. I was resolving calls on the helpdesk, trying to impress as a new starter and dying to become more involved.

One of the things I really did like about my new company was that women held a lot of the account manager and facilities management roles. This made me realise that facilities is not necessarily a male-dominated world and that more and more women are making it to the senior roles. Knowing that they weren't from a trade or engineering background either also made it easier for me, as this is not my background either.

I also enjoy the fact that, in my experience, women in facilities management don't take their 'egos' to the table like men do, which allows us to get down to business without trying to prove ourselves in the way I have witnessed men around a table do.

After a few months of just working the helpdesk, I felt I needed more of a challenge.

I was honest, open and flexible when starting out in facilities and showed an eagerness to learn and take on more responsibilities and as a result I was soon involved in many of the small projects that were going on.

A lot of the time I was simply attending meetings, taking minutes and typing up the documents, which annoyed me somewhat as I was not a PA or office administrator. But looking back I can see the bigger picture now. I learned so much from listening to how things were done and how tricky situations were resolved. I learned how to write a proposal, a financial report, quarterly contract and financial reviews, create and manage a monthly KPI report, survey customers, set up an intranet page and hold my own in client meetings. The exposure was great and gave me a growing confidence in my choice of career. I was hooked.

ON A QUEST

But soon I reached a plateau with this role and found the levelling out very frustrating. So I went to my manager and he introduced me to the BIFM, which I joined as an associate member and then began investigating to opportunities for further study.

I decided I wanted to do a formal qualification in facilities management, so that I would be able to demonstrate both a practical knowledge and a theoretical understanding of all the competencies in facilities management, not just ones I would come across at the organisations I would work with and for.

I was only 24 at the time and I knew I would need years' more experience to reach the same level as my colleagues and mentors, but this was time that I just couldn't wait for. And so began my quest to gain the BIFM Qualification.

I chose the BIFM route, as my manager, who is a BIFM member, had recommended it to me, and from

going through a lot of the facilities management magazines and websites, I could see that the BIFM was mentioned everywhere. I chose to study through training provider BPP Malpas as they were based close to where I work, their achievements were consistent and their communication, assistance and support were excellent.

The same month I started my BIFM course, I was promoted to an internal facilities management position at a site where we were helping to provide a caretaker facilities management role. The new position came with a lot of support from my company, but I also had a lot to prove. They were investing a lot in me, giving me a site of my own and paying my study fees.

I worked so hard in the months I was there for the duration of the contract. I read everything I could, I tried to link things I had heard and seen before, and of course I learned to ask advice from more experienced people in the trade. That took a lot as I am fiercely independent, but I have also learned that in facilities there is little point in battling along, trying to reinvent the wheel, when you have people around you who have so much knowledge and experience they want to share.

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KEEPING SANE

Attending the BIFM tutorials alongside this steep learning curve really gave me the opportunity to link what I was learning practically to what I needed to learn theoretically. I won't lie – doing the BIFM course takes a lot of hard work, focus and time, but what you gain from the tutorials, networking and learning for the exams is something I feel you could never do on your own in the highly demanding business that facilities management is. Contacts in the field are vital to keeping you sane and helping you to continually improve and that's what the BIFM tutorial group and sessions provided.

Starting out in facilities management, you can never begin to imagine the diversity and the need to be familiar with everything from recruitment to finance, from construction to mechanical systems, from health and safety laws and environmental issues, to paint products, adjustable chairs and maximum voltage capabilities.

During the course of the next 18 months I received on-the-job and specialist training on a whole variety of topics, from fire training to employment law, inductions and H&S audits, wages, recruitment and financial management, churn management, procurement, and M&E contractor management.

Working for a facilities services provider allowed me to gain a lot of experience by visiting different sites and learning about different company cultures, something I found vital to my development and really enjoyed.

I was involved in new win contract start ups,

so I learned all about the Transfer of Undertakings Regulations (TUPE), innovating contracts, setting up new ones, negotiating costs, client relationships, having a 'can-do' attitude, providing exceptional customer services and consultancy work. And the clients were so varied, ranging from the private to the public sectors, from financial to technological. How many budding facilities managers are able to experience such diversity, learn so much about different organisations and get to see how each one is affected by their culture, sector and financial backing? I really could not have asked for a better education alongside my BIFM course.

EXAM NERVES

I will admit I was terrified when we had to sit the first set of exams. I decided to sit all three at once as I felt there are so many overlapping elements to facilities management, where would I stop learning for one competency and start learning for another? For me it was better to be able to learn facilities as it is.

I studied really hard for the exams and drew a lot from the revision tutorials and past exam papers. Knowing how to answer every question from past papers is very important, as is comparing your answers to the examiner's report. Doing this helps you identify the areas you are struggling with and investigate them further. Past papers give you such a good indication as to where your knowledge is lacking and where you need to improve.

In November last year I felt I was ready for a new challenge and I became an in-house facilities manager. My focus has now completely changed. It's a very new environment and I have had to learn a lot more about the core business as their strategy and goals form the basis for mine. I had become very accustomed to working in a company whose main business was my business – it's a very different world when your discipline is no longer your company's main focus.

I now have the opportunity to use the knowledge and experience I have gained to bring the role of the facilities team in my new company into the light. We want to develop a niche for the department which makes people realise there is a lot more to facilities than cleaning and toilets! Bringing facilities to the front line – showing the strategic side and planning to achieve the company's vision, of streamlining to reduce costs while managing to create an environment which is not only comfortable but also boosts the productivity of those who work in it. It's a great challenge and I hope I can prove to myself that I can meet the challenges I have set for the next few years.

I don't think I would have taken the step out of the world of facilities services provider so easily had I not had the training, networking and experience I have gained through the BIFM programme." ■

Alison East is a facilities manager with Genworth Financial