

S pecifications

One of the most important parts of an FM service outsourcing contract is the specification. Some organisations leave it to their suppliers to document the services that are to be provided, but this frequently leads to problems. Disputes arise because the customer does not set out exactly what is expected from the contractor. This should be incorporated into the contract in a section of its own separate from the Terms and conditions and usually split between the Management requirements and details of specific contract services.

Traditional outsourcing specifications were entirely input orientated i.e. number of cleaners, frequency of maintenance visits etc. This means that the requirement specifies exactly how the outcome should be achieved based on list of tasks, frequencies, and allocated time slots. Oversight of such contracts is relatively easy requiring a simple check to see if each task was completed where, when and how it was specified by the client. Contractors following an input specification need strong management systems and administration processes.

Input specifications make it very easy to compare suppliers in a tender situation. With the methodology entirely dictated by the client the only difference between bidders is the price for which they are prepared to carry out the same work. However this removes any opportunity for innovation in process or application and may result in work being carried out even when it is not really required. Input specifications need to be regularly reviews to take account of changes in local requirements. The client may also have unreal expectations of results having set the frequencies while the supplier can always blame the specification if things go wrong.

These problems led to the development of specifications more focused on results than processes. An output based specification is based on a service level agreement linked to performance levels and measures the end product, i.e. level of cleanliness, achieved, average temperature or frequency of breakdown. Such an approach places much more responsibility on the contractor requiring dynamic and pro-active management input to make the best use of available resources. Operatives need to be trained and empowered to make a judgement on what is needed to achieve the standard. Innovation is actively encouraged and flexibility is needed to deal with changes in local need.

Most successful contracts are a combination of the two, specifying certain mandatory and minimum levels of performance such as legal compliance, environmental standards or hours of attendance while allowing freedom to use the contractors' professional and technical expertise to best effect on the clients' behalf.

Both of the main standard forms of FM contract published by the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and the Joint Construction Tribunal (JCT) allow for the use of input and output based specifications.

Both the CIOB and the JCT standard FM forms of contract are available from the CIOB bookstore www.constructionbooksdirect.com or the RICS bookstore www.ricsbooks.com