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INSIGHT

# Hotels or Forces into FM



# Introduction

Facilities management has always drawn people from other worlds. Some of its best leaders began in hotels, restaurants, events or the armed forces, and brought with them habits the sector values: a feel for service, an instinct for discipline, and a steady head when something goes wrong.

The fit is not an accident. A hotel is a building run to a guest promise. A military base is an estate run to an operational standard. FM is the profession of keeping buildings, people and services working to a standard, every day, usually unseen. If you have spent years doing that in another uniform, you are closer than you think.

But closeness is not the same as readiness. Hospitality managers and service leavers often meet the same obstacles: employers who cannot read their experience, a language gap on CVs, a lack of recognised qualifications, and gaps in technical compliance and contract management. Neither route is better. Each has its own strengths, and its own blind spots.

This guide takes both starting points in turn. It shows what transfers, how to translate it, which gaps to be honest about, which entry roles make sense, how to build credibility, and what to expect in your first six months. Where a section applies to one group more than the other, it says so.

# Why FM suits people from service and uniformed backgrounds

FM rewards two things above all: delivering a consistent standard, and responding well when conditions change. Both hospitality and the armed forces train these in depth, in different ways.

Hospitality teaches you that the customer experience is the product. Forces training teaches you that a mission depends on the unglamorous work of logistics, maintenance and readiness. FM combines both, because every building is a service to people and an operation that must function.

- Pressure is normal: you have worked through busy services, short staffing or operational tempo, and you do not panic.
- Standards matter: you are used to inspections, briefings and doing it properly when nobody is watching.
- People are the job: you have led teams, often young or rotating, and handled difficult characters.
- Flexibility is expected: shifts, early starts, call-outs and changing plans are not a shock.

That is the good news. The caution is that FM also has its own technical and regulatory substance, which employers will not waive. Treat your background as a strong foundation, not a finished building.

Be wary of assuming that your background alone will open doors. It will get you a hearing from some employers and nothing from others. The candidates who do best combine a credible story with specific preparation, and they treat the first role as an apprenticeship in the sector rather than a reward for past service.

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# Measure twice, shortlist once



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## What hospitality brings

If you come from hotels, restaurants, venues or events, this section is for you. You carry strengths that many technical FM professionals have to learn later in their careers.

The first is service instinct. You know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of a building that does not work, and you tend to anticipate problems before the guest or occupant notices.

- Customer and occupier handling: de-escalating complaints, recovering a poor experience and making people feel looked after.
- Team scheduling: rotas, cover and managing staff across long and varied hours.
- Supplier management: ordering, negotiating, quality checking and managing deliveries.
- Budget awareness: controlling costs, margins and waste daily.
- Event and space management: setting up, turning round and resetting spaces to a deadline.
- Health and safety basics: food safety, fire awareness and incident procedures.

These transfer particularly well into workplace experience, front of house, soft services and hospitality-led corporate roles. The weakness to address is usually technical: building systems, statutory compliance, planned maintenance and the language of engineering contractors.

A strong example: a hospitality manager who has handled a flooded kitchen, an evacuation and a failed lift on the same busy weekend has real incident experience. Describe it as incident management and supplier coordination, not just a bad weekend, because that is what an FM employer will recognise.

## What the armed forces bring

If you are leaving the services, this section is for you. Many employers in FM actively value service leavers, particularly where operational discipline and safety culture matter.

You have been trained in leadership from a young age, and often hold responsibility that civilian peers would not see for years. Your challenge is rarely capability. It is translation.

- Leadership under pressure: leading teams, making decisions with incomplete information and owning outcomes.
- Planning and logistics: organising people, equipment and timelines to a deadline.
- Safety and procedure: working to defined standards, risk assessment and accountability.
- Technical trades: if you served as an engineer, electrician, mechanic or in a related trade, you may already hold directly relevant experience.
- Resilience and reliability: turning up, finishing the job and being straight about problems.

Where you worked on estates, infrastructure or accommodation, you may already have done a version of FM, just under a different name. Where you did not, your leadership and discipline remain valuable, but you will need to show you can adapt to a civilian commercial environment, where outcomes are negotiated and authority comes from influence rather than rank.

If you served in a technical trade, check how your training maps onto civilian qualifications and registrations. Equivalence is not always automatic, and an employer will want to see what you hold in civilian terms. Ask for advice from your resettlement team or a relevant professional body, and check the current position before you rely on it.

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# Good careers start with a call



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# Translate your experience into FM language

The single biggest barrier is that hiring managers cannot easily see how your experience fits. Do the translation for them. Do not make them guess.

Replace internal terms, acronyms and rank structures with plain statements of scope, responsibility and result. Imagine explaining it to a facilities director who has never worked in your world.

- Instead of a job title the employer does not know, describe the role: led a team of a given size responsible for a defined service or area.
- Instead of an operational posting, describe the setting: managed accommodation, equipment or site operations for a defined number of people.
- Instead of a hospitality title alone, add scope: ran front of house for a venue with a given capacity, or managed suppliers and a budget.
- Instead of internal jargon, state the outcome: improved inspection results, reduced downtime, raised guest satisfaction.
- Instead of a list of duties, show the standard you worked to and how you kept it.

Give numbers only where you can state them accurately. Never invent or round up. A modest, truthful account of your responsibility is stronger than an exaggerated one, because interviewers will probe it.

A good test: show your CV to someone outside your old world and ask what they think you did. If their answer is wrong, rewrite until it is right.

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# Your next role should stretch you



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## Be honest about the gaps

Employers will forgive a lack of FM experience. They will not forgive a lack of awareness of what you do not know. Naming your gaps before they do is one of the strongest signals you can send.

In FM, the gap that matters most is safety and compliance. Buildings carry legal duties around fire, water hygiene, electrical safety, lifts, asbestos and more. Responsibility sits with named people, and mistakes carry real consequences.

- Statutory compliance: know the main regimes in outline, and who is responsible for each in a building you might manage. Check the current position with your advisers or employer.
- Technical systems: heating, ventilation, electrical, fire and security systems at a conceptual level.
- Planned preventive maintenance: how maintenance regimes work, and why missed tasks matter.
- Contracts and service levels: how outsourced services are specified, measured and held to account.
- Industry vocabulary: terms, acronyms and the structure of the sector.

Hospitality candidates tend to be stronger on people and weaker on technical. Forces candidates tend to be stronger on process and leadership and weaker on commercial and client-facing influence. Know which is you, and plan accordingly.

One more gap is commercial and client awareness. In FM, you will be asked to justify cost, handle a client who is not always right but is always the client, and explain a decision to people who do not report to you. If you have not done that, say so, and describe how you plan to learn it.

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# Know the market, then set the salary



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# Choose the right entry route

Not every FM role is equally open to career changers. Pick roles where your strengths carry the most weight and your gaps matter the least, then grow outwards.

These are sensible entry points, depending on your background.

- Workplace experience and front of house: a natural home for hospitality professionals who want to stay close to people and service.
- Soft services management: cleaning, catering, security and reception teams, where people leadership and standards matter most.
- Site or building manager: a contained role suited to people who can run a team and a building day to day.
- Facilities coordinator or helpdesk lead: a way into the operation, learning the systems and the supply chain.
- Contract roles with service providers: structured training, clear standards and exposure to many sites.
- Estates and infrastructure roles: especially for service leavers with a technical trade or accommodation management background.

A decision test: which role lets me use at least two-thirds of what I already do well from day one? If the answer is less, you may be starting too far from your strengths. Also ask what progression looks like. A good first role should lead somewhere within two to three years.

Do not rule out agency or interim work as a bridge. A short assignment can give you building exposure, a reference and a better sense of which part of FM suits you, though you should weigh it against the security you need. Take advice on contracts and your own circumstances before committing.

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# Right person, right moment



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## Build credibility with evidence

Credibility in a new field comes from three things: recognised learning, relevant exposure and visible commitment. You can build all three while still employed in your current role, or during resettlement if you are leaving the services.

Start with a foundational safety qualification such as an IOSH or NEBOSH certificate, which many FM employers recognise. Then look at the Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management for introductory qualifications and membership, which show you have chosen the profession deliberately.

- Service leavers: ask your resettlement team about funded courses, work placements and employer links. Check what is available to you now, as entitlements change.
- Hospitality: ask your current employer if you can shadow the engineering or maintenance team, or take on responsibility for contractor management.
- Both: volunteer for a project that touches the building, such as a refurbishment, a compliance audit or a move.
- Both: attend a regional professional group and talk to people doing the job you want.

Be careful to match your learning to the role. A well-chosen certificate and a documented project beat a long list of unrelated courses. Employers read a clear direction as seriousness.

Also keep a simple record of what you learn. A notebook of building systems, terms and lessons from each site becomes a prompt for interviews and a sign of the discipline employers want to see.

## Tell your story at interview

Interviewers in FM like stories that show judgement, not slogans. They will want to hear how you behaved, what you decided and what happened.

Prepare a handful of stories from your previous career, and map each to a competence that FM employers value. Make sure you can explain why you are changing sector, in a sentence that sounds positive and considered.

- A time something critical failed and you kept control: hospitality or forces, the lesson is the same.
- A time you raised standards in a team: show how you set expectations and followed through.
- A time you managed a supplier or resource that fell short: show fairness and firmness.
- A time you put safety first against pressure to cut corners: this one matters a great deal in FM.
- A time you learned something fast from nothing: it proves you can close the gap.

Expect the direct question: how will you cope with technical content you have not done before? A good answer names the gaps, describes what you have already done to start closing them, and shows you know how to lean on specialist colleagues and contractors without losing accountability.

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# Specialists see what generalists miss



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## Adjusting to a different culture

Every sector has an unwritten culture, and FM is no exception. Knowing what to expect speeds up your first months.

Hospitality people often notice that FM is quieter and less visibly rewarded. Success is when nothing goes wrong, so praise is rarer and problems are what people remember. You may miss the immediate thanks of a good service.

- Forces leavers: authority is earned through relationships, evidence and persuasion rather than rank. Expect to negotiate where you once gave orders.
- Forces leavers: commercial thinking, margins and client budgets will feel unfamiliar. Ask patiently and learn.
- Hospitality: the pace is steadier, but the stakes around compliance are higher, and records matter. Get used to documenting what you do.
- Both: contractors and technical staff may test you early. Admit what you do not know, ask good questions and follow through.

In your first six months, aim to listen more than you speak, learn the building and its documents, build relationships with the engineers and the client, and deliver one visible improvement. That mix of humility and results is what earns trust. A good mentor, ideally someone from a similar background who has made the move, shortens the learning curve.

## Your career-change checklist

- [ ] Write down the three strengths from your current or former career that FM employers value most.
- [ ] Rewrite your CV in plain language, with scope, responsibility and outcomes, and no internal jargon.
- [ ] Ask someone outside your old world what they think you did, and fix any misreading.
- [ ] List your honest gaps in compliance, technical systems, contracts and vocabulary.
- [ ] Book a foundational safety course and look at introductory FM qualifications.
- [ ] Shortlist two or three entry roles where you can use most of your strengths from day one.
- [ ] Speak to two people who made a similar move and ask what they wish they had known.
- [ ] Prepare five interview stories, including one about putting safety ahead of pressure.
- [ ] Write a one-sentence answer to why you are changing sector, and practise saying it.
- [ ] Plan your first six months: listen, learn the building, build relationships and deliver one visible improvement.

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# The best moves are considered ones



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# Next steps

FM welcomes people from hospitality and the armed forces because they arrive with habits the sector cannot easily teach. What they must add is technical awareness, compliance knowledge and the commercial language of the industry. Do the translation, be honest about the gaps, and choose an entry role that rewards what you already do well.

A practical next step: take your current CV and rewrite the top third in plain language for a facilities director who has never worked in your world. Maxwell Stephens is a specialist Facilities Management recruitment consultancy, and a conversation about which entry roles suit your background is a sensible early step.

# A FINE POSITION TO BE IN

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