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INSIGHT

Developing in FM: Planning Your Learning



Introduction

Most FM and estates professionals did not plan their careers. They arrived through a technical trade, an operational role, a move from the military or another sector, or a graduate scheme that led somewhere unexpected. Development often followed the same pattern: a course when a manager suggested it, a certificate when the law required it, and a long stretch with nothing in between.

That worked when experience alone could carry you to the next job. It works less well now. Roles at senior level are broader than they were: commercial, regulatory, people and technology skills sit alongside technical competence. Employers read a CV for evidence of growth as much as for a list of jobs held.

Planning your learning is therefore not a luxury. It is how you choose your direction rather than have it chosen for you. A good plan does not need to be long or expensive. It needs to be specific, linked to a role you actually want, and realistic about the time you have.

This guide gives FM and estates professionals a practical method: decide the destination, audit the gaps, choose the right mix of learning, win support, make time and prove the result. It does not recommend particular courses, because the right choice depends on your role and the provider market changes. It does tell you how to decide.

Why a learning plan beats good intentions

Most people intend to develop. Few do it deliberately. The reasons are familiar: the job is busy, learning feels optional, and nobody has told you what to learn. So development drifts towards whatever is compulsory or whatever lands in your inbox.

A plan fixes this in three ways. It turns a vague wish into a short list of decisions. It lets you say no to courses that look interesting but lead nowhere. And it gives you something concrete to discuss with your manager, who can support what they can see and defend.

Think of the alternative. Without a plan, you will be developed by accident: by the incident that taught you something painful, or the restructure that decided your next role. Some of that is unavoidable. Much of it can be anticipated.

- A plan makes you choose, so you spend limited time on the highest-value learning.
- A plan creates a record, which turns into evidence at appraisal and interview.
- A plan makes the case for funding easier to write.
- A plan shows employers you take your own career seriously.

Keep it small. One page, reviewed quarterly, beats a beautiful document that nobody opens. If you can explain your plan in a minute to a colleague, it is the right size.

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The best moves are considered ones



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Start with the destination, not the course catalogue

Most development planning begins with a list of courses. That is backwards. Begin with the role you want in three to five years, then work back to what it requires.

Be specific. 'Senior' is not a destination. 'Head of Facilities for a multi-site corporate occupier', 'Estates Director in a university' or 'Operations Director at an FM service provider' are destinations. Each demands a different mix of skills, and each leads to different learning choices.

Collect evidence about what the target role needs. Read current job descriptions for roles one or two levels up. Talk to people already doing them. Ask what they wish they had known earlier, and what surprised them. Note the repeated themes, because those are what employers are paying for.

A useful decision test is to ask, 'If I were offered this role tomorrow, what would I be worried about?' The worries are your development agenda.

Be ready for the answer to be less comfortable than the plan you hoped for. Sometimes the target role needs a step you have not considered, such as a move from a single site to a portfolio or from in-house to a service provider. Treat that as useful information rather than a setback.

- Write down your target role and your target date.
- List the five to eight capabilities that appear in most job descriptions for it.
- Mark which of them you can already evidence with examples.
- Note any formal requirements, such as particular qualifications or professional membership.
- Name an alternative route, in case your first choice closes.

Revisit the destination each year. Careers change, and a plan built for a goal you no longer want is worse than no plan.

Audit your gaps honestly

With a target in hand, compare it with where you are. The point is not to flatter yourself or to beat yourself up. It is to find out which two or three gaps would most change your prospects if closed.

Split your skills into three groups. Technical and regulatory: the compliance, engineering, health and safety, and operational knowledge your role demands. Commercial: budgets, contracts, procurement, service levels, business cases and reporting. Leadership: leading people, influencing senior stakeholders, managing change and handling pressure.

Most FM professionals who plateau are strong in the first group and thinner in the second and third. Moving from manager to director is rarely blocked by technical ability. It is blocked by the ability to talk finance, manage suppliers at scale and lead through others.

Write the gaps as sentences you can act on, such as 'I have not owned a budget above a single site' or 'I have not led a supplier retender'. Specific gaps are easier to close than general ones like 'commercial awareness'.

- Ask two or three trusted colleagues and one senior person where you are strongest and where you are weakest.
- Review your last two appraisals for repeated themes.
- Look for tasks you avoid or hand to others, because they often point to gaps.
- Rate each capability against the target role: strong, adequate, thin or absent.

Pick the biggest two or three gaps and ignore the rest for now. A plan that tries to fix everything fixes nothing.

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Great leaders make it look simple



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Know the four kinds of learning

Development is wider than qualifications, and a good plan uses all four types. Each does a different job.

- Qualifications: structured, recognised and slow. Useful when a role or employer expects a credential, or when you need a broad foundation.
- Short courses and certificates: focused, quicker and often specific. Good for a particular skill, regime or system.
- Experience: stretch assignments, projects, deputising and secondments. The most effective way to learn leadership and commercial skills.
- People: mentors, peers, professional networks and sponsors. They teach you what courses cannot, and they open doors.

Most plans lean too heavily on one type. Technical people lean on courses and certificates. Ambitious people lean on qualifications. Both underuse the two that matter most for senior moves: experience and people. A balanced plan for a year might contain one course, one stretch assignment, one mentor and one piece of networking.

Match the type to the gap. A regulatory knowledge gap suits a course. A gap in handling budgets suits a project and a mentor. A gap in senior influence suits exposure to the boardroom and someone who has been there.

A common mistake is to buy a course to solve a problem that really needs experience. If you cannot practise the skill within a month of learning it, it will fade. Always ask where you will use what you learn.

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Read the room before the CV



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Choose qualifications with a hard test

Qualifications can be valuable, but they cost time and money, so choose with care. In FM the landscape includes professional body qualifications and membership, health and safety awards, engineering and building services certificates, project and management qualifications and degrees. The right choice depends on your route, so check current offerings and entry requirements with the awarding body.

Apply a simple test before you commit. Would the qualification be named in a job advert for the role I want? Would the people hiring for that role respect it? Does it teach something I will use within six months? If you can answer yes to two of the three, it is worth serious consideration.

If a qualification is a stretch for your current circumstances, consider a stepping stone. A shorter award can test your appetite for study and build confidence before you commit to something longer.

- Check whether employers in your target sector ask for it by name.
- Check the time commitment honestly, including study, assessment and travel.
- Check the total cost, including exam fees and membership.
- Ask people who completed it what they gained and what they would do differently.
- Check that the provider is properly accredited or recognised.

Avoid collecting letters for their own sake. A senior hiring manager is more impressed by one relevant qualification, applied well, than by a long list of unrelated ones. And remember that for statutory regimes, competence matters more than a certificate. Employers want to know you can do the job.

Learn on the job: stretch, shadow and deputise

Much of what makes a leader cannot be taught in a classroom. It is learned by doing something slightly beyond your comfort zone, with support. That is why experience-based development is usually the highest-value part of your plan, and the cheapest.

Ask for the work that builds the gap you identified. If budgeting is thin, offer to prepare the annual budget submission with your manager. If supplier management is thin, ask to join a contract renewal or retender. If influence is thin, ask to present to the leadership team on an issue you own.

Write down what you learned each time. A stretch assignment that is not reflected on is just extra work.

- Volunteer for a project that crosses departments, such as a move, refurbishment or systems change.
- Ask to deputise for your manager at meetings and during leave.
- Shadow a peer or senior in an area you want to understand.
- Take on a secondment or a short-term assignment at another site.
- Lead a lessons-learned review after an incident or project.

Agree success measures at the start, and ask for feedback at the end. Without feedback, experience can repeat your habits rather than change them.

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Every senior hire matters



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Use mentors, peers and professional networks

The people around you are among your best sources of learning, and the least used. A good mentor shortens your career by telling you what they wish they had known. A peer group tests your thinking. A professional network tells you what the market is doing before it appears in a report.

When choosing a mentor, look for someone two or three steps ahead of you, ideally outside your direct reporting line. Be clear what you want from them: a monthly conversation, feedback on a decision, a view on a move. Make it easy for them. Come with a specific question and respect their time.

Join the professional community of your sector. Go to meetings, speak on a panel when you are ready and volunteer on a committee. The aim is not to collect contacts. It is to be known for something.

- Prepare two or three questions before each mentoring conversation.
- Offer something back, such as a fresh perspective or a useful introduction.
- Build a peer group of three or four people at similar levels who will tell you the truth.
- Seek a sponsor, someone senior who will speak up for you when you are not in the room.

Be generous in return. Mentor someone more junior. Teaching sharpens your own understanding and builds your reputation as a leader.

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Say what you can deliver, then deliver it



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Win your employer's support

Many professionals assume development is a personal cost. Often it is not. Employers regularly fund learning that benefits the business, but they respond to a clear case, not a vague request.

Write your case on one page. State the development, the cost and the time. Link it to a business problem: compliance resilience, supplier performance, a project on the horizon or a gap in the team. Say how you will use the learning and how you will share it. Offer to report back.

Timing helps. Raise the request around objective-setting or budget planning rather than in the middle of a crisis, and bring a proposal that makes your manager's job easier, not harder.

- Check whether your employer has a training budget, an apprenticeship route or a levy.
- Ask about study leave and exam time.
- Read any repayment clause that applies if you leave soon after finishing, and take advice if it is unclear.
- Suggest a part-funded arrangement if the full cost is too much.
- Offer to brief colleagues, so the whole team benefits.

If the answer is no, ask why, and ask what would change it. Funding refusals often reflect timing or budget, not your value. If your employer will not invest in your growth at all, note that as information about your future there.

Make time: a rhythm you can keep

Time is the real constraint. FM is a reactive profession, and learning is easily crowded out by the next incident. The answer is a rhythm that survives a bad week.

Block a regular slot, such as ninety minutes weekly, and treat it as a meeting you cannot move. Pair it with a trigger, such as the first morning of the week or a quiet part of a shift. Short and regular beats occasional and heroic.

Protect the slot from the usual raiders: the inbox, the walk-round that always overruns, and the task you could do tomorrow. If the slot keeps moving, shrink it rather than abandon it. Thirty minutes done is better than ninety minutes promised.

- Choose one main learning goal per quarter and no more.
- Break it into small weekly actions you can actually complete.
- Tell your manager and a colleague, so someone is aware if you slip.
- Use journeys and quiet periods for reading, podcasts or short modules.
- Plan around your busiest times, such as audits, budget season or year end.

When you miss a week, restart without ceremony. The goal is a habit, not a perfect record.

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Leadership in facilities is a serious job



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Record it, prove it and review it

Learning only helps your career if people can see it. Keep a simple log: what you learned, how you used it and what changed. Include course dates, but also outcomes such as a cost saved, an audit improved or a team member developed. Where you belong to a professional body, use its development recording system if it has one.

Turn the log into evidence. On your CV, show not only the qualification but the result. At interview, describe a challenge, what you learned and what you did differently as a result. That is far more persuasive than a list of certificates.

Review your plan every quarter. Ask what you completed, what you learned, what to drop and what to add. Once a year, return to the destination and check it still fits.

A final point on honesty. Not every course changes your practice. If something taught you little, record that too, and do not repeat it. A plan that evolves from evidence is a sign of professional maturity, and it is the kind of reflection senior panels like to hear.

Share your progress with your manager. People support what they can see, and visible growth is the best argument for the next promotion.

Your FM development plan checklist

- [ ] Name your target role and a date three to five years out.
- [ ] List the capabilities that role demands, from real job descriptions.
- [ ] Rate yourself honestly, with input from colleagues and your last appraisals.
- [ ] Pick the two or three biggest gaps and ignore the rest for now.
- [ ] Choose the right mix of qualification, course, experience and people.
- [ ] Test each qualification against whether employers name it and you will use it.
- [ ] Ask for one stretch assignment that builds your biggest gap.
- [ ] Find a mentor and a small peer group.
- [ ] Write a one-page case for employer support, linked to a business need.
- [ ] Book a protected weekly slot and log what you learn and what changes.

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It starts with a good first call



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Next steps

You do not need a large budget or a long plan to develop well. You need a clear destination, an honest view of your gaps and a rhythm that survives a busy week. Choose a mix of learning that suits the gap, and record the difference it makes.

Your next step: this week, write down your target role and the three capabilities you most need to build, and book your first ninety-minute learning slot. Maxwell Stephens is a specialist Facilities Management recruitment consultancy.

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