Sixteen years ago there were a limited number of true facility management software systems available in Australia, most of them were from European or U.S. suppliers. They were mostly large, cumbersome and extremely expensive systems—not very endearing to a facility manager who always seemed to have the smallest corporate budget. The reason for so few choices was there was such small demand, with most building superintendents, as they commonly were named, tucked away in a basement and undertaking facilities requests themselves. Old facilities departments were responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the building—not just receiving the call but also physically attending to the maintenance request. They had tool belts, not IT systems.

Recorded data on maintenance histories or asset values were scarce, and small basement offices were drowning in hard files of paper records or rolls of massive coffee-stained CAD plans. To look anything up could take hours, and to plan a relocation could take weeks of manual redrawing. Reports at the touch of a button were but a dream.

The facility manager’s responsibilities have come a very long way, and, concurrently, there has been an increase in the availability of systems and processes to assist. Facility managers today are responsible not only for maintaining the existing built environment, but for ensuring the entire workplace is productive, while keeping costs for heating, cooling, waste and energy as low as possible for both existing and new buildings. Facility management is performed during the operational phase of a building’s life cycle, which normally extends over many decades. It represents a continuous process of service provision to support the owner’s core business and one where improvement is sought on a continuous basis.

How technology has changed business
Facility management is a massive undertaking with much responsibility. According to the International Facility Management Association, facility management is “a profession that encompasses multiple disciplines to ensure functionality of the built environment by integrating people, place, processes and technology.” And technology has changed the way business is accomplished. In the past, the facility department didn’t get wireless service requests or works orders—everything was manual. Planned maintenance was a handwritten reminder in a diary, which often led to dire consequences. Who would remember when an asset warranty was up, what suppliers had updated accreditations, what maintenance
was costing, how actual costs were tracking against budget, whether the work had ever reached the contractor, let alone been completed? Heaven forbid if a director wanted a report on outstanding maintenance and the status of works. Leaping through manuals and phoning contractors in a mad panic still wouldn’t guarantee an accurate answer, and it definitely wouldn’t be a quick process.

Technology has made facility management faster and far more efficient. One cannot lose sight of the fact that every dollar spent on facility management comes off the bottom line because it doesn’t produce revenue. As a facility manager, it is necessary to be both strategic and operational. Building owners need to be informed about the potential impact of their decisions on the provision of space and services, and it is the up to the facility manager to ensure proper operation of all aspects of a building to create an optimal, safe and cost-effective environment for the occupants to function. Technology is the life support system of a facility department.

The bigger picture
To get true value through technology, a company needs to embrace the big picture. Maintenance management systems may manage the ad hoc and planned maintenance of a facility with great efficiency, but is that enough? When considering technology, it is astute to scope widely. For example, a maintenance system will help a facility manager to plan and react to maintenance within locations, but what happens if a receptionist is responsible for booking meeting rooms and doesn’t realize a particular room is unavailable for two days due to repairs and maintenance? How is communication automated between the facility group and the receptionist? Relying on people to inform others works sometimes, but in a busy office, memory overload is a risk.

There are many examples of a requirement for shared data, and technology today lends itself to facilitating this, although the business processes need to be scoped and understood before a system is implemented. It’s a mistake that many do make—cost-effective software comes on the market that seemingly addresses all a company’s immediate facility management requirements, and so the system is installed. However, the company grows and the requirements change, new corporate IT technology is installed and the cost-effective system running suddenly becomes extremely costly as it is adapted and changed to meet the internal changes. A good facility manager will do her/his own due diligence on technology. A continuing problem is that more than half of facility management systems purchased to make the facility team more efficient ends up as shelfware—a disturbing fact given that facility management sorely needs analytical and communication tools.

Intuitive technology has taken a lot of the pain out of managing the built environment and has changed the way we think.

Breakthroughs in FM technology
- All essential safety measure tasks can be scheduled within a facility management system, and a work order automatically generated when it’s due, thereby taking the risk out of missing critical dates and timelines.
- General tasks such as checking roof and downpipes, checking machinery, plant and equipment are all entered in a facility management system and automatically initiated via work order when due.
- Regular contractors can be maintained in the system together with their accreditation information, including induction information, rates and contact information. The system automatically will inform when any of the critical accreditations are due to expire so records are always up-to-date and the user is proactive in risk management. These contractors can also be evaluated by clients, and companies can start to rate their efficiency and professionalism, helping to reduce risk of poor contract management.
- Occupational health and safety issues can be logged through a good facility management system, keeping track of any incidents, including equipment involved and what the action was.
- A document repository is key to any good system—all building plans, drawings, videos and documents are embedded in the system and can be attached to a work order along with any standard work documents so there is no excuse for contractors not to abide by company regulations.
- With a Web-based system, clients can enter through a personalized portal at any time and check on the status of work in their building. Contractors can log in via the Web portal to check on work coming up for them, and it is also possible to give them the ability to close work via the portal.
- A savvy system also will allow users to manage the water, waste and energy of buildings.
- Scheduled reports should be available on any information in the system, to anybody at any time. For example, users may want the tenants in the building to know what work is due that week on their floor. Or a manager may wish to have a report scheduled to them every Monday morning to show him what work is due that week on all properties. All of these reports can be set up in advance and automatically run and emailed to the appropriate person, thereby saving time and ensuring accurate reporting.
- All of the building information, including contractor information, fixed assets, ESM schedules, ad hoc maintenance
schedules, etc., is in one system, enabling the user to report across buildings at the click of a button.

**Cost benefits**
The daily cost benefit will be in the day-to-day operational cost reduction:

- The average cost of each maintenance task can be reduced by 5 percent;
- The cost of energy to each building for lighting and heating can be reduced by 5 to 20 percent;
- The cost of cleaning by service contracts can be reduced by 15 to 25 percent;
- The cost of insurance premiums based on better and managed work practices can be reduced; and
- The per square meter cost of operating a facility can be reduced by an average of 4 percent per year.

The major cost reduction, though, is not in direct cost savings but in reducing risk for the organization, its executives and staff:

- Cost of huge fines for non-compliance;
- Cost of executives in prison thus reducing productivity;
- Cost of reputation damage to business;
- Cost of work cover premiums; and
- Cost of compliance with multilayered government agencies.

**Changing the way we think**
Intuitive technology has taken a lot of the pain out of managing the built environment and has changed the way we think. Now it is possible to make huge savings on every aspect of managing an asset, whether it’s the physical maintenance, the staff productivity levels or the environmental impact of running a building. *FMJ*

Kristiana Greenwood is a director of FM Innovations Pty Ltd. She has more than 20 years of marketing and sales management experience and has worked in the U.K., Italy, South Africa, France and Luxembourg.