# TRANSFORMERS: THE AGE OF FM

When Transformers hit the market in 1984, they were simply a clever toy that children could manipulate into different shapes: A robot might change into a car, a spacecraft, a weapon or even a household item such as a cassette recorder. Over the next decades, these toys spawned a global media franchise that includes comic books, movies, TV series and more. As these toys developed personalities and histories, they teamed up and fought battles; they traveled through space and time. But the basic premise remained the same: These were extraordinarily adaptable entities that could change form in an instant to address a situation in the most powerful and effective way.

A reader might be forgiven for thinking that sounds like the job description of a facility manager. FMs are regularly expected to take on any challenge that comes their way, and to “shift shape” to handle an enormous variety of tasks, from master planning to plumbing repairs. While the same individual likely doesn’t handle all tasks, FM teams tend to be smaller than optimal, as well as minimally funded, and so each member will likely take on at least a few roles as needed.

Look at how IFMA defines the profession of Facility Management: “Facility management (FM) is a profession that encompasses multiple disciplines to ensure functionality, comfort, safety and efficiency of the built environment by integrating people, place, process and technology.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Elaborating on this, the association defines 11 core competencies -- Occupancy and human factors; Operations and maintenance; Sustainability; Facility information and technology management; Risk management; Communication; Performance and quality; Leadership and strategy; Real estate; Project management; Finance and business – and additional shared roles including Security, Grounds Management, and Planning.

The point here is not to wittily compare the work of facility management to the superpowers of science fiction heroes and villains, regardless of how apt the comparison may seem at times. Instead, the purpose is to better understand business transformation, its impact on facility management, and how facility managers can participate in the process of transformation.

## Shape-Shifters vs. Agents of Change

“We can change anything into anything,” declares the evil industrialist Joshua Joyce, played by Stanley Tucci in the 2014 film, “Transformers: Age of Extinction.” That’s a pretty ambitious definition of transformation but then again transformation is a pretty ambitious concept.

Dictionaries offers two primary definitions of the verb “transform”: The first and simplest is to change the shape of something. The second is, “To completely change the appearance or character of something/somebody, especially so that it is better; to completely change in appearance or character.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The entertainment world’s Transformers evoke the first meaning of the term: These characters alter their own shape to accomplish a task. They change themselves. And that is a perfectly valid use of the term. The other definition of a transformer, too, is well understood and relevant: Something that changes the characteristics of something external to itself. Think of an electrical transformer, which transfers alternating current from one circuit to another, in the process changing its voltage. These transformers are agents of change.

Sometimes both definitions may be captured in one person. A common example is a person who adopts a new technology, say Business Analytics, becomes expert at using that technology, uncovers new insights through it, and then uses those insights to come up with a new way to generate revenue for an existing business.

“The overall goal of transformation is not just to execute a defined change — but to reinvent the organization and discover a new or revised business model based on a vision for the future. It’s much more unpredictable, iterative, and experimental,” John Ashkenas wrote in the Harvard Business Review.[[3]](#endnote-3)

That person who became expert at Business Analytics most likely did not know what she would discover. The goal was simply to master an emerging technology. But then, that mastery led to unexpected revelations – perhaps correlations between seemingly diverse phenomena – that sparked development of a new business model, presumably one that would take advantage of the technology and the insights it provides.

## What is meant by “transformation” in business?

Transformation is a much-overused term today, invoked to describe anything from a new hairstyle to a technological innovation that changes multiple industries (think iPhone in 2007). In many cases, what is hyped as transformation is simply change, or even rearrangement. Shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic couldn’t save that ocean liner anymore than shuffling an organizational chart will, by itself, save a dying company.

What business experts agree on is that in their world, transformation is more than mere change. Change may introduce new tools and new workflows, but the practices and metrics of the business remain essentially the same. Moving financial management from manual ledgers to computer spreadsheets made many practices more efficient, but did not fundamentally change the business of accounting.

In the words of John Palinkas, managing partner of the Institute for Digital Transformation: “Transformation is *fundamental* in nature. And when it’s done right, transformation has a permanent and far-reaching impact throughout the organization.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Well-known examples of transformation abound in the business world. In the 21st century, Apple transformed its business model from a strict focus on computer hardware and software to one that embraced music, telephony, digital photography, film and television.

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Scott D. Anthony of Innosight Consulting summarized the difference: “If a company is using the same metrics before and after its so-called “transformation” effort, it really hasn’t transformed in any material way.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Outside the realm of entertainment, transformation is not generally regarded as a bidirectional process. Writing in a religious context, for example, the Canadian minister Carey Nieuwhof characterized transformation as, “That moment when people no longer want it the way it was.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Transformation of a business can have a major impact on facility management and vice versa. When Netflix switched its primary focus from distribution of video entertainment via DVDs to streaming, its facility focus changed from warehouses and distribution centers to data centers (a relatively short-lived move that was ultimately replaced by outsourcing to AWS).

Let’s look at a more current, and more universal, example of an emerging transformation, one that puts facility management at the forefront of change.

When millions of corporate and public-sector workers suddenly had to work from home in early 2020 due to the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic, that was change. Now, a year and a half later, when many of those workers are resisting returning to their offices and organizations are looking at ways to institutionalize what is now known as “hybrid” work, we see transformation happening.

A Fujitsu executive was quoted in the Harvard Business Review on the aftereffects of the pandemic-driven shift from the office to working from home: “We are not going back. The two hours many people spend commuting is wasted – we can use that time for education, training, time with our family. We need many ideas about how to make remote work effective. We are embarking on a work-life shift.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

The key to successful transformation may be widespread understanding and acceptance of the value of doing things differently. In this case, the value to workers seems clear, but understanding the value to the business may take more thought.

## Workplace Transformation/Digital Transformation and COVID

The COVID pandemic boosted two kinds of transformation that had already been under way: Workplace Transformation and Digital Transformation. The two are intimately related, and facility managers can play key roles in both.

However, not everyone agrees on the definition of either term, although there does seem to be consensus that they are related.

Red Thread, a services company that bills itself as a provider of Workplace Transformation, four years ago identified as drivers of transformation the increasing complexity of work, the generational shift in the work, and technology advancement. It was all about flexible spaces. In 2021, Red Thread’s emphasis has shifted to health & safety (in light of the COVID pandemic), business culture and, of course, technology.

When we all worked in offices, we tended to work at the same or similar times, allowing for the different time zones of distributed offices in many organizations. But with remote or hybrid work, many employees have more latitude in setting hours that are convenient to them with respect to the other facets of their lives – family obligations, personal health, etc.

The first dimension of change here – employees working in diverse and remote locations – has often been addressed, however inadequately, by techniques such as videoconferencing. During the pandemic, Zoom and Teams calls proliferated, to the point where many felt burned out by the reliance on these technologies. But that second dimension, temporality, requires different measures. Yes, organizations can and do rely on asynchronous technologies such as email and file sharing to span time zones, but these are accommodations to reality, not transformative techniques. True transformation would involve finding new ways of doing business – and perhaps even redefining the business – in light of these changes in the dimensions of space and time. Many organizations are struggling with – or even ignoring – that imperative.

Says Palinkas: “Companies’ quick shift to a work-from-home model during COVID-19 pandemic is *change.* Slack’s June 2020 announcement that it was [permanently moving to a hybrid workforce model](https://slack.com/blog/news/june-update-on-slack-office-closures-from-slack-svp-of-people-robby-kwok)that all but eliminates the idea of ‘headquarters’ as the operating heart of the company is *transformation.”[[8]](#endnote-8)* (Eliminating the concept of headquarters as the hub of operations is, of course, a transformation that would be largely carried out by facility management).

Digital Transformation has been the focus of similar struggles. There is no doubt that many aspects of life have been changed by the introduction over the past 40 years or so of desktop computing, the Internet, mobile computing, smartphones, wireless, artificial intelligence and other technology developments. We no longer see typewriters on office desks, our reliance on the postal service is much reduced, fax machines are collecting dust, and multi-button telephone handsets are an endangered species. But how much differently are our work patterns than they were a generation ago?

Implementing new technologies so that machines do the same work that people did before is change. Using the capabilities of those new technologies to alter the understanding of the work is transformation.

One might argue that all of the new technology needed a major event like the pandemic to show us, for example, that business could be conducted without airplane tickets, hotel rooms and handshakes across tables. Whether we really have adapted to that realization is arguable, but there is no question that many eyes were opened during our period of enforced isolation.

On the other hand, many of us miss the bustle of an office full of people, where we often learned more through 30-second hallway and water cooler conversations than we did from staff meetings and memos. There have been some transformations that have resulted from the changes forced by the pandemic, but really the workplace is in a state of flux.

Peter Sondergaard, a senior vice president at Gartner, Inc., sees digital transformation as driven by four goals:

* enhanced competitiveness,
* higher profitability,
* better customer experience, and
* greater agility across the enterprise.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Notice that “adoption of new technologies” is not a goal. It is an enabler. Implementing new technologies so that machines do the same work that people did before is change. Using the capabilities of those new technologies to alter the understanding of the work is transformation. George Westerman of the MIT Sloan School of Management put it this way: “[When digital transformation is done right, it’s like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, but when done wrong, all you have is a really fast caterpillar](https://twitter.com/TheDigitalTP/status/727498566378233857/photo/1).”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Palinkas recommends asking these three questions when considering any change in the business:

* Will simply following new processes and procedures achieve the intended results? Or is something more foundational needed?
* Are monitoring and metrics enough to maintain the desired state?
* Do your people have a fundamental belief that is not in line with your desired end state?[[11]](#endnote-11)

## Facility Managers as Transformers

Many FM organizations can be characterized as “experience-driven,” and that can be a very good thing. There is enormous value in the knowledge built up by and utilized by long-term FM team members. However, we have for a while now been facing a situation where many FM workers are aging out of the workforce, and organizations are losing the benefit of their knowledge. One way to combat this is to transform the organization from experience-driven to data-driven. Relying on “the numbers” to guide decision-making and action means shifting attention from sensory observation to the generation, collection, aggregation and analysis of data. This, in turn, can promote new strategies and techniques such as just-in-time maintenance, predictive maintenance, activity-based space management and costing, among many others.

Also transformative is smart, connected equipment that can report operational anomalies such as overheating, leakage, low fuel levels, reduced flow, etc. When machines can report their own problems – and we expect them in the near future to be able to go beyond that to ordering their own parts and service – the thousands of annual hours that humans have spent doing rounds of inspections can be enormously reduced, and technicians who were thus engaged can be freed up to do higher level work. When housekeeping routines can be tied to actual utilizations of spaces, those resources can refocus on improving rather than maintaining.

Systems that monitor, gather, aggregate, and manipulate the information coming from machines and sensors become counterparts of the various facilities teams that oversee building operations, environmental health and safety, space planning and more. Those machines should not be thought of as competition for jobs, but as electronic assistants that provide the humans in facility management with information they could not have easily collected before. This information can be the foundation for serious review of the way the organization is working and how it could be tuned.

Facility managers have long been the eyes and ears focused on the workplace, and in this task they can continue to spot opportunities not only for improvement but for transformation. Facility managers see what the occupants are doing, and hear what they like and don’t like. When an office that is a sea of workstations sits three-quarters empty but employee lounges and conference rooms are bursting with activity, facility managers have an opportunity to recommend not just the rearrangement of furniture, but the reconceiving of how office space should be provisioned, promoted and used. Headquarters underutilized? Eliminate the headquarters!

The back-office triumvirate of FM, IT and HR collectively hold much of the information that can inform the business about what needs to be transformed, and are the agencies that are likely to have the largest roles in implementing transformations. The real estate industry may tell companies that in the USA, the current vacancy in city-center office space is over 16 percent, but you need FM, IT and HR to tell you that inside the occupied space there is a much higher vacancy rate, and why.

All of those 11 core competencies of FM as defined by IFMA continue to be critically important in the age of transformation. If to some degrees facility managers are shape shifters like those science fiction characters, their higher-level value will be in the observations they make, the analyses they conduct, and the recommendations they make for rethinking the business and its use of expensive real estate.

As facility management continues its transformation into a data-driven function, the information it provides to the business will become more valuable because it will be that much more granular, timely and verifiable. Facility management workers will be increasingly freed from the obligation of creating the data and more able to focus on analysis, trend-spotting, cost evaluation and recommendations to the business for potential transformation.

1. <https://www.ifma.org/about/what-is-facility-management> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/transform#:~:text=%5Btransitive%2C%20intransitive%5D%20to%20completely,scheme%20will%20transform%20your%20bedroom>, accessed 9 September 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ron Ashkenas, “We Still Don’t Know the Difference Between Change and Transformation”, Harvard Business Review, January 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Palinkas, “Change vs. Transformation : What are the Differences?”, CIOinsight, 27 May 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Scott D. Anthony, “What Do You Really Mean By Business Transformation?”, Harvard Business Review, February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Carey Nieuwhof, “Why Change Isn’t the Same as Transformation (And What To Do About It as a Leader)”, <https://careynieuwhof.com/transformation/>, accessed 7 September 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lynda, Gratton, “Managing People: How to Do Hybrid Right,’ Harvard Business Review, May 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. John Palinkas, op cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ed Clark, “Digital Transformation: What Is It?”, <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2018/5/digital-transformation-what-is-it>, accessed 7 September 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. George Westerman, quoted in “Transformation versus Change,” <https://www.thedigitaltransformationpeople.com/channels/the-case-for-digital-transformation/transformation-versus-change/>, accessed 7 September 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Palinkas, op cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)