Making Facility Condition Assessments Work

Planned correctly, assessments uncover potential problems to support long-term planning

By Dan Hounsell, Senior Editor

The often chaotic nature of maintenance and engineering management means that managers rarely get the whole story when it comes to institutional and commercial facilities. Daily maintenance activities, as well as broader facility upgrades, tend to focus managers' attention on specific components and systems throughout facilities, rather than on the entire facility.

For managers to ensure that facilities help organizations serve their missions, they need the whole story, not just part of it. That is where facility condition assessments (FCA) come in. A facility condition assessment is a systematic evaluation of a building's physical condition and systems that helps managers and their teams make decisions about maintenance, repairs and long-term capital planning.

"Managers need to understand the connection to organizational mission and link your report outcomes to organizational mission," says Laurie Gilmer, president and chief operating officer of FEA, a facilities management and planning firm. "Use it as a vehicle to accomplish the mission. Then the FCA becomes a powerful tool to help you articulate why you need to do what you do. You've attached it to what you as an organization are about. Landing it within that context, that makes the FCA a really amazing tool. It's more than a report on the shelf."

What's the frequency?

To be as effective as possible, managers need to take a structured approach to facility condition assessments, tailoring them to their facilities.

"The frequency and the scheduling depend to a large extent on the age, the condition and the type of the facility," says Lawrence Keenan, senior vice president and director of technical services with Hoffmann Architects + Engineers. "A new building is going to have far different requirements than an older building with deferred maintenance.

"That ties into the condition. Condition and age are usually somewhat linked, but a poorly performing building with

Among the important decisions managers must make is deciding who will perform the facility condition assessment — in-house technicians or outside consultants.

many work orders for leaks will require more frequent review than a brand new, pristine structure. Obviously, the type of facility is going to come into play. There are different forms of degradation for, say, a skylight versus a traffic coating on a parking garage."

Gilmer says that while she sees facilities that perform assessments every 10 years or so, having them performed more often can benefit facilities.

"What is preferred and more useful is somewhere in the three-to-five-year range," she says. "Five years, that's probably the outside cycle if you were looking at scheduling cyclical FCAs. One of the reasons you want to do it on a shorter time frame and not wait 10 years is that things change so much in that three-to-five-year window. If you can do it on a three- or five-year cycle, the accuracy of the information that you're using for financial planning is going to be better."

While it might be tempting for managers to schedule a facility condition assessment in response to a particular event or emergency, managers need to focus on the longer-term application and benefits of the assessments.

"An FCA is more of a planning tool," she says. "It's broad in its scope. For an immediate failure, it might prompt a manager to put together an FCA if it inspires them to think about financial tools, risks to the facility, etc. But it's really meant to be a broad application for specific pieces of equipment and elements within the building. If that's your immediate concern, you're probably just looking at a localized investigation."

In or out?

Managers also must decide who will perform the facility condition assessment — in-house technicians or outside consultants. Each option has its benefits. In-house technicians are no doubt more familiar with their facilities, including their problem areas, while outside experts bring experience to the process related to a broad range of facilities and equipment. Gilmer says the answer can depend in part on skill and experience levels.

"Is the person who's going to perform the condition assessment competent for the systems that they're reviewing?" Gilmer asks. "Do they know what they're looking at? If they're going to look at MEP systems, do they understand what the systems are and what they do so that they can understand then how to assess?"

Keenan says that at some point, managers should involve a professional in the process, given their experience with systems and components in different kinds of facilities.

"A professional should be involved in some routine schedule," he says. "Some inspection or some assessment is better than no assessment. So an assessment by an unqualified eye is better than no assessment at all. Any layman could tell whether or not sealant joints are failing or if brick is bulging.

"That being said, a more qualified inspection done on some regular basis, even if it's pushed out to 10 years, they're going to be able to tell you where your problematic conditions lie and the things to keep an eye on.

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Given the staffing challenges in maintenance and engineering departments and the mounting challenges presented by aging facilities, Gilmer says managers also might need to consider bringing in an outside inspector if workloads on in-house technicians are too heavy.

"Sometimes, you may not have the skill level available to you on your team, but what we see more often is that you have the skill level but people just don't have the time," she says. "Their resources are stretched thin, and so they need to bring in an outsider who can focus on going to take a look at your systems."

Making it all work

To ensure a facility condition assessment delivers the intended benefits, managers need to take key steps to prepare. Their actions before the process starts can lay the foundation for a more effective assessment. One critical first step involves a task that many managers overlook: communicating the importance of the assessment that will target key equipment in the facility.

"One of the things we talk about in facilities is how to communicate need and risk — how to relate the risk of what happens to the productivity of the facility" if equipment fails, Gilmer says. "To keep the (FCA) report from sitting on the shelf, a big part of it is being able to articulate the importance of various pieces of equipment or issues that you've identified and relating that to your ability to meet the mission of your facility. That is what's going to change the utility of the report."

Managers also need to provide the inspector with essential information about systems and equipment being assessed.

"It is really helpful if they can gather information about the facility," Gilmer says. "If they have past reports, that's really helpful. Sometimes, drawings are helpful, not always. A maintenance history also is important. We're looking for things like, where are the problems? How has the equipment been behaving? Are there things that are popping up with more frequency? Has there been a history of a particular piece of equipment failing?"

Keenan says managers also need to be certain that inspectors can get to all critical areas of the facility.

"Arrange for appropriate access," he says. "It's not always clear if you're looking to do an assessment that all the areas that require assessment are easily accessible. There could be elevated conditions that never get looked at because there's no elevated access or there's no access to a roof or the roof is not accessible because of safety reasons. There are things that need to be arranged to do an appropriate assessment, and that needs to be part of the formalized assessment process."

One final step in preparing for the FCA is spelling out expectations regarding the final report on the assessment.

"The report should prioritize all recommendations for the repair with a replacement timeline," Keenan says. "The results of the assessment should be prioritized, and any relevant ancillary information should be included, as well, such as remaining warranty periods for materials. If you're going to recommend that a roof be replaced within the next five years, it would be good to know that it's either going to be within or outside of a warranty or the projected lifespan of those materials."

Avoiding trouble

Facility condition assessments present managers with a host of challenges related to preparation, performance and follow-up, so avoiding common mistakes is critical for ensuring their success.

For example, Gilmer says managers need to avoid misinterpreting the information an assessment report offers related to costs.

"Sometimes, people call it a cost estimate, but we have to be very careful," she says. "We're not identifying construction-level estimates for projects. The numbers we come up with are used for planning. Sometimes projects that are identified get packaged with other elements. At that point, when you're planning and developing your project, that's when you can get a more refined estimate."

Keenan says managers also need to avoid procrastination — specifically, waiting until something has gone wrong to initiate an assessment.

"Assessments should be performed on a routine basis and thus would be considered proactive," he says. "It's quite often that an assessment will be performed when budget allows or response to some of that.

"If a hurricane comes through, now we are doing an assessment. That's a reactive assessment. You're looking for damage. You're not really looking for the health of your facility or looking ahead to create a master plan for the facility. It should be routine. It shouldn't be reactive."

Finally, Gilmer says that at all costs, managers need to avoid the most critical mistake of all — not using the final report on the facility condition assessment.

"One of the mistakes is just not understanding what it's there for," she says. "It's a really great tool for facilities managers to use. If you let it sit on the shelf, that's some great information in there that is just fermenting away on the bookshelf." ■

Dan Hounsell is senior editor for the facilities market. He is an award-winning journalist, has spoken at NFMT and other national conferences and has more than 30 years of experience discussing and writing about facilities management, maintenance and operations issues.

Facilities Condition Assessments: A Starting Point

A facility condition assessment can be a complex process, especially for maintenance and engineering managers starting from scratch. Laurie Gilmer, president and chief operating officer of FEA, a facilities management and planning firm, says managers can start the process by consulting ASTM E2018-24, Standard Guide for Property Condition Assessments: Baseline Property Condition Assessment Process

"That is a really good place to start," Gilmer says. "If a facility manager is trying to figure out what an assessment should look like, the ASTM standard is a really good first place to go to. It's a good resource."

— Dan Hounsell