

FM LEADERSHIP BLOG

Why Unskilled FM Staff Quietly Increase Your Building Risk

— And What You Must Do About It —

Your building compliance checklist is green. Every fire extinguisher is tagged. Every maintenance log is signed. But here's the question no one asks: does the person who signed that log actually know what they're doing?

That's the silent risk hiding in plain sight across FM operations worldwide. Not missing equipment. Not broken systems. Unskilled hands operating critical infrastructure — confidently, quietly, and dangerously.

Certifications expire. Staff turn over. Shortcuts become habits. And facility managers, under pressure to control costs and keep operations running, often don't see the gap forming — until something goes wrong.

This blog is your wake-up call. We'll walk you through four real-world stories that show exactly how skills gaps translate into building risk. Then we'll give you a practical 4-step Skills Audit you can run in your facility starting this week.

Why Skills Are a Risk Issue, Not Just an HR Issue

FM professionals are responsible for the safety of buildings, the continuity of operations, and the protection of the people inside. When a piece of equipment fails, we look at the machine. When a process breaks down, we look at the system. But when the risk is human — when it's a technician who's been doing things the wrong way for three years — we rarely have a structured mechanism to detect it.

According to industry research, over 60% of FM-related incidents are attributable to human error — and within that, a significant proportion trace back to inadequate training or competency gaps. That number isn't abstract. It's a sprinkler system improperly maintained. It's a high-voltage panel serviced by someone whose licence lapsed eight months ago. It's a BMS alarm silenced by a technician who didn't understand what it meant.

The consequences: regulatory fines, insurance liability, operational downtime, reputational damage — and in the worst cases, loss of life.

This isn't about blame. It's about building a culture where skills verification is as routine as fire drills and preventive maintenance schedules.

The Technician Who Didn't Know What He Didn't Know

RISK

Sector: Commercial Office Tower | System: HVAC & BMS | Consequence: Six-week cooling failure, \$400K+ in losses

Raza had been with the FM team for four years. He was reliable, punctual, and well-liked. When the senior HVAC engineer resigned, Raza was the natural choice to step up temporarily.

No one checked his actual competency on the building's new BMS platform, which had been upgraded 18 months prior. Raza had attended the initial vendor demo but never completed the full certification course.

Over the following months, Raza managed alarms by silencing them and logging them as "investigated and resolved." He didn't fully understand the trending data showing a refrigerant leak in Chiller Unit 2.

When the chiller finally failed — on a Friday afternoon in July — the entire cooling system for a 22-storey building went down. Emergency contractor costs, tenant compensation, and emergency procurement of temporary cooling units totalled over \$400,000. The investigation found no equipment fault. The chiller had been giving warning signs for 11 weeks.

LESSON

Competency isn't inherited with a job title. Without a structured skills verification process, you are relying on assumption — and assumption is not a risk management strategy.

The Contractor Nobody Checked

RISK

Sector: Healthcare Facility | System: Fire Suppression | Consequence: Failed suppression system, regulatory shutdown

A specialist fire suppression contractor was brought in for quarterly maintenance of the hospital's clean-agent suppression system in the data centre. The contract was renewed automatically for three consecutive years.

What no one reviewed was that the lead technician assigned to this contract had changed twice. The current technician, while employed by the same company, had never received OEM-specific training for this suppression system type. He had training for a similar (but different) system from another manufacturer.

During a routine discharge test, the system failed to trigger correctly. A regulatory audit — prompted by an unrelated incident — discovered the discrepancy. The facility was issued an

improvement notice and ordered to halt operations in the affected area pending a full system review.

The contractor's contract was terminated. But the damage was done: two weeks of disrupted operations, emergency re-certification costs, and a regulatory blemish on the facility's record.

LESSON

Vendor approval is not the same as competency approval. The person doing the work matters as much as the company holding the contract. Build individual competency verification into every contractor management process.

The Expired Licence Nobody Noticed

RISK

Sector: Manufacturing Plant | System: High-Voltage Electrical | Consequence: Near-miss incident, insurance voided

Marcus had been the plant's senior electrician for nine years. His HV (high-voltage) licence had originally been validated during his induction. Nobody had built a system to track renewal dates.

His licence expired 14 months before a near-miss incident occurred during a switchgear maintenance task. The task itself was completed without injury — but when the incident was reported and investigated, the lapsed licence was discovered.

The insurance company flagged that work had been performed on high-voltage systems by an unlicensed operative. They refused to cover any associated liability for that period. The company faced a retroactive compliance review covering all HV work conducted in those 14 months.

Marcus was not at fault — he had simply assumed that if there was a problem, HR would have flagged it. He was right that someone should have flagged it. He was wrong that anyone would.

LESSON

Compliance is a system problem, not an individual problem. If your organisation does not have an active, automated certification tracking system, licences will lapse. It's not a matter of if — it's when.

The Night-Shift Gap

RISK

Sector: Luxury Hotel | System: Fire Panel & Emergency Response | Consequence: Delayed evacuation, regulatory action

A five-star hotel prided itself on its FM standards. Day-shift staff were well-trained, regularly audited, and professionally certified. Night-shift was a different story.

Two of the three night-shift technicians had received only basic induction training. When a fire panel activated at 2:47 AM — triggered by a kitchen extractor fault — the on-duty technician

hesitated for over nine minutes before escalating to the duty manager. He wasn't confident reading the panel and didn't want to cause a false alarm evacuation.

The fire brigade's post-incident report noted the delay as a significant concern. While the alert proved non-life-threatening, the response protocol failure triggered a full audit by the local fire authority.

The day-shift and night-shift competency gap was immediately identified. The hotel had been inadvertently running two different standards of FM operation under the same compliance banner.

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| LESSON | <i>Risk doesn't observe business hours. Your skills audit must cover all shifts, all roles, and all contractors — not just the team that's visible at 10 AM.</i> |
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THE 4-STEP FM SKILLS AUDIT

Run this in your facility — starting this week

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| STEP 1 | Map Every Critical Role | <p>List all FM roles that touch life-safety systems: fire suppression, HVAC, electrical, access control, lifts. Don't forget subcontractors and night-shift staff.</p> <p><i>✓ Output: Role registry with system responsibility matrix.</i></p> |
| STEP 2 | Verify Certifications & Expiry | <p>For each role, confirm required licences, OSHA/local equivalents, OEM training, and first-aid certs. Cross-check against validity dates — not just 'held once'.</p> <p><i>✓ Output: Certification tracker with RAG (Red/Amber/Green) status per person.</i></p> |
| STEP 3 | Run a Competency Gap Test | <p>Go beyond paperwork. Use scenario-based assessments: 'What do you do when the BMS raises a Chiller-2 fault at 2 AM?' Practical knowledge beats certificates alone.</p> <p><i>✓ Output: Competency gap report with individual training needs.</i></p> |
| STEP 4 | Build a 90-Day Remediation Plan | <p>Prioritise gaps by risk level. High-risk roles (fire, emergency systems) get remediation within 30 days. Medium-risk within 60 days. Document accountabilities and re-audit dates.</p> <p><i>✓ Output: Signed training plan with milestone dates and escalation triggers.</i></p> |

A well-executed Skills Audit is not a one-time exercise. The most effective FM operations embed it as a quarterly or bi-annual process — integrated with contract renewal cycles, equipment upgrade programmes, and staff performance reviews.

The Core: From Compliance Theatre to Competency Assurance

There's a critical difference between compliance theatre — where documents look right — and competency assurance — where people actually are right.

Compliance theatre happens when:

- Training records are maintained but never verified
- Certifications are filed but not tracked for expiry
- Contractors are approved at company level but not individual level
- Night-shift and weekend staff are overlooked in audit cycles

Competency assurance happens when:

- Every person touching a critical system is mapped and evaluated
- Certification validity is actively monitored with early-warning alerts
- Practical competency is tested — not assumed from paperwork
- Training gaps trigger mandatory, time-bound remediation plans

The facilities that get this right don't just reduce risk. **They build credibility.** With insurers. With regulators. With the tenants, patients, guests, or employees depending on the building every single day.

TAKE ACTION THIS WEEK

Don't wait for an incident to reveal your competency gaps.

Here's your 3-point action plan for this week:

1. Download the Skills Audit template and schedule a kick-off meeting with your FM team leads.
2. Pull your current certification tracker — and honestly assess: do you even have one?
3. Identify your top 3 highest-risk roles and validate competency for those individuals this month.

Need a starting point? Comment 'AUDIT' below and we'll share our FM Skills Audit Starter Kit — free.

Remember: Risk doesn't take a day off.

Schedule your Skills Audit. Protect your people. Protect your building.