

LONG FORM

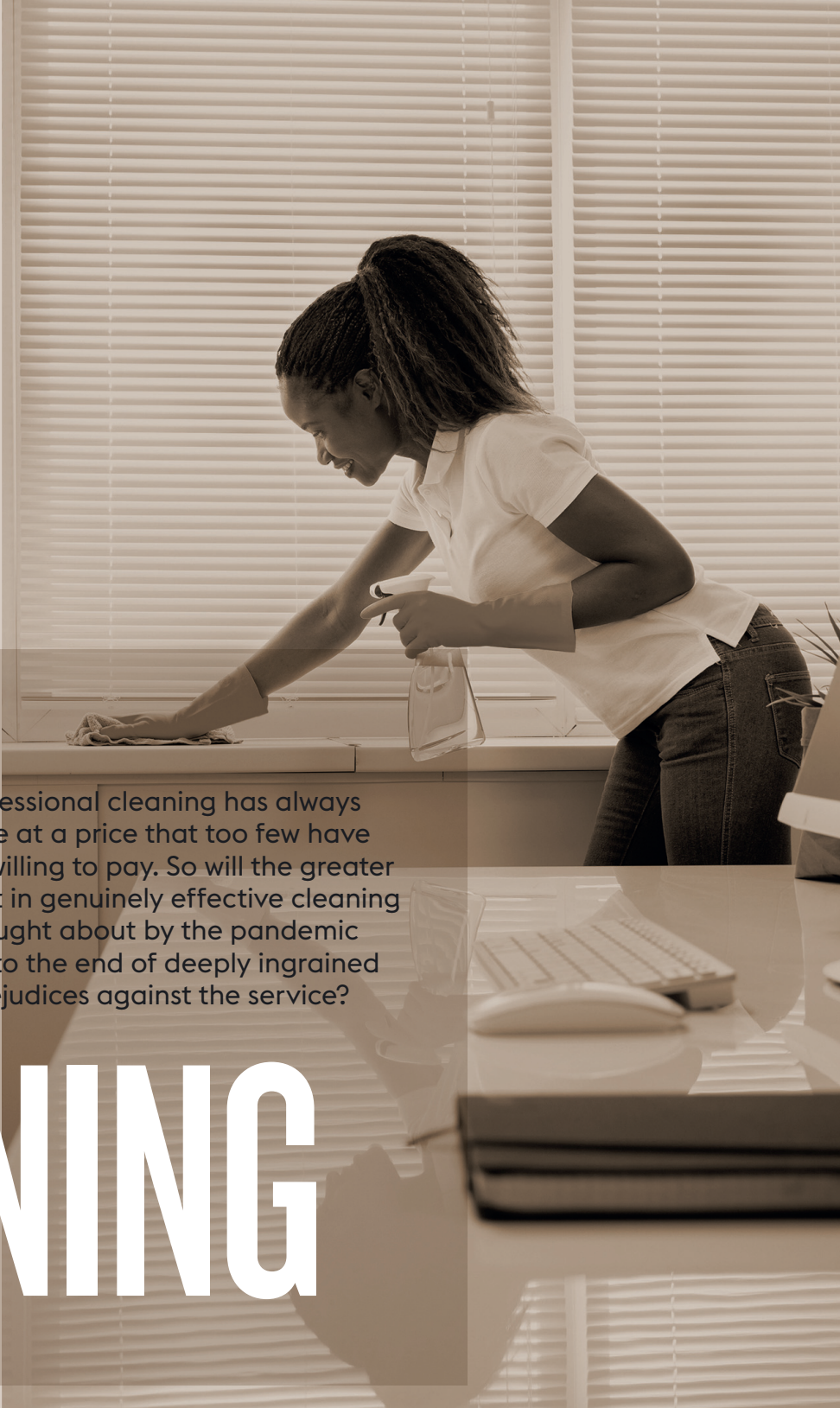
OPEN PLAN / CATERING / CLEANING

The end of the invisible service? That's the hope. It's been nigh on three decades since the advent of battery operated back-pack vacuums allowed client organisations the option to revolutionise their cleaning service, deploying cleaners to work on-site during working hours. Yet in 2019 the concept of cleaners working alongside the end-users they serve was still a subject of debate. Cleaning remained the invisible facilities service. Today, after a sudden injection in enthusiasm from clients keen to show employees that they're keeping them safe, many have, for now at least, opted to introduce 'day cleaning' and the back-pack tech it brings with it.

That gap in time is instructive. For years, innovation in cleaning service - the way it is done, its measurement, the products used - has largely failed to see professional cleaning budgets protected.

Many, though, see the pandemic as bringing about the end of this thinking. Firstly, it has led to clients putting cleaning front and centre.

"We've had some really positive client input about the work OCS has been doing for them during

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and dark jeans, is leaning over a desk. She is holding a spray bottle in her right hand and a cloth in her left, appearing to be cleaning the desk surface. The background shows a window with horizontal blinds. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark rectangle containing text.

Professional cleaning has always come at a price that too few have been willing to pay. So will the greater interest in genuinely effective cleaning brought about by the pandemic lead to the end of deeply ingrained prejudices against the service?

CLEANING

lockdown, getting their facilities ready and then reopening them,” says the company’s head of cleaning, Yvonne Taylor.

“What we’re seeing is clients who initially wanted cleaners to be seen all the time to give their end-users confidence are now moving to using different methodologies and different cleaning chemicals. Many have reverted back to the same cleaning schedule as they had previously, but with more appropriate chemicals.”

‘Miracle cures’

Early attempts in the pandemic by the unscrupulous to sell potentially toxic cleaning chemicals have largely abated. Taylor controls what products her teams deploy, researching the many misleading claims being made by suppliers. “We had to get the evidence about these products and then talk it through with clients for them to actually understand what particular products do and don’t work.”

Some claims do not stand up to sensible scrutiny. The Cleaning & Hygiene Suppliers Association (CHSA) points out that “any claim on a product stating it is proven to kill the virus is untrue.”

Like other service providers, Taylor used her experience to assess what product firms were claiming.

“Perhaps a product will last for 30 days on a surface, but that’s based on no one going in and using those surfaces, so of course it’s still going to be clean.”

She has been surprised by firms that have not done the necessary due diligence and risk mitigation, hoping that a British Standard focused on the efficacy of barrier cleaning products will be developed as a result of the pandemic.

Vinci Facilities head of cleaning Melanie Richardson has had a similar experience. “Clients are reading a lot, so when you meet with them they’d be cross questioning everything getting things wrong. Obviously they are

nervous and wanted to do the right thing. But most, thankfully, have listened to us. You have to ensure you know enough about how to treat the virus and how to work in their best interests to make buildings safe yet not increase costs to a point where it’s untenable.”

Like Taylor, Richardson has had to battle companies selling in products that claim miraculous capabilities.

“Just spraying everything with dangerous chemicals is the thing I am most concerned about. That’s not how you get rid of it. You have to sit down [with clients] and rationalise what’s actually going on and what you really need to do.”

Training operatives is crucial, with Vinci opting to put their personnel on ISSA courses.

“The key instruction that came from that course was to keep it simple. Don’t over complicate things. It’s actually a really easy virus to dismember; you just need to do a thorough clean using soap and water, then sanitise afterwards and make sure people are washing

their hands. It’s as simple as that.”

James Gilding, Mitie’s managing director, Cleaning and Environmental Services, says there is another reason for clients’ newfound interest in cleaning product efficacy.

“As businesses turn their attention back to driving net zero carbon targets, we anticipate a move to more sustainable cleaning solutions – be that chemical-free or reduced packaging. This is set to be one of the biggest shifts in our industry over the coming years.”

Day cleaning

The pandemic may also herald the end of an enduring prejudice against cleaners doing their job during office hours.

“We’re seeing cleaning staff now being used during the day,” says Taylor. “I think an element of that daytime cleaning will stay, and that will be fantastic for our industry. Many organisations will now need to see a visible cleaning team on site, and not necessarily one that’s just running around cleaning ▶

ATTEMPTS BY THE
UNSCRUPULOUS TO
SELL POTENTIALLY
TOXIC CLEANING
CHEMICALS HAVE
LARGELY ABATED



LONG FORM

OPEN PLAN / CATERING / CLEANING

touch points every four hours.”

“Daytime cleaning would make us less of an invisible workforce. It can put us at the forefront of people’s mind. I think it needs to be higher on the corporate agenda.”

For Richardson, there’s a productivity dimension.

“More reliance on battery operated machines is a way forward; it gives you much greater productivity. It’s time for people to review how they’re actually doing things today.”

Part of the problem has been the premium paid for such devices, but Richardson sees costs coming down just as battery life is increasing. And Vinci has seen day time cleaning become acceptable in railways stations and schools. Cleaning ‘within hours’ is no longer the outlier choice.

At Mitie, Gilding says day cleaning still has some limits.

“There really is no ‘one size fits all’. For example, in offices certain tasks, such as vacuuming, can distract employees and cause disruption. Similarly, deep sanitisation cleans will always need to take place out of office hours to ensure they can be done thoroughly.

“We continue to have a mixed

approach, with deep cleaning tasks taking place out of hours and top-up cleaning throughout the day.”

Robotics

As for new beginnings, the advance of robotic cleaning equipment has been significant. OCS uses cleaning robots from Industrial Cleaning Equipment (ICE), its ‘Co-Botics’ range designed to work alongside the cleaning team. Taylor is enthusiastic about the ‘co-botic’ concept - and of putting a robot to use alongside teams of cleaners; “the team can do a physical clean with chemical and cloth, then the robots can do the soft and hard flooring,” explains Taylor. “It’s a good combination.”

“For a long time robots could just do hard floors,” says Taylor. “Now they can do hard floors, soft floors, exteriors; you don’t even need to take a robot to another floor now - it can actually call its own lift.”

Robots used primarily in healthcare robots that use a form ultraviolet light - UVC - are now being used in environments. Taylor is routinely talking to clients about their potential - “we’ve had interest from the education, aviation and venue sectors.”

She is also an evangelist for the telemetry available from cleaning machinery, expecting clients to be drawn to better measurement of both their manned and autonomous cleaning equipment in the years ahead.

“UVC robots have been revolutionary, but it’s all about using the right product for the environment you’re in.”

Mitie’s Gilding uses the service firm’s MoonBeam solution to explain the tech.

“UV-C light provides

fast disinfection of large areas and can be as quick as 90 seconds. The wavelength of UV-C is 200-280 nm, which is just right to destroy the DNA of single cell organisms, i.e. bacteria, viruses and fungi.

“The technology uses a motion sensor that can detect when someone is in the room, making sure it is absolutely safe and, of course, uses no chemicals. We’re also using forensic torches, which use LED light, to identify spots where bacteria may be accumulating. We use these systems in tandem with a manual clean to ensure both visible and invisible contaminants are removed.”

All in all, there’s no question that opportunities to end old assumptions about the cleaning industry have suddenly opened up. Says Taylor: “I hope that if there’s anything good to come out of all this it’s that firstly we’re now seen as a profession and not as that invisible workforce anymore, and also that we are brought into our clients’ teams more, getting the respect we should be given.”

Richardson says it’s also about the FM profession accepting the importance of the function.

“The problem with the industry is that it’s been driven down from a cost perspective for such a long time,” she says. “Whenever FM’s look to cut cost, it’s always been with cleaning. But now we’re having to turn things around a bit.”

Some firms may simply revert back to something akin to previous practice. But, says Richardson, “this is a big opportunity for the industry, and for FM. People need to really understand a lot more about cleaning and spend more time on it rather than just leaving it to the contractor; they need a better idea about what’s actually being done in their building and demanding a more professional service.

“Obviously, that comes at a price,” she concludes. Whether that price will be more routinely acceptable to clients remains the question. **f**



YVONNE TAYLOR, head of cleaning, OCS



MELANIE RICHARDSON, head of cleaning, Vinci Facilities



JAMES GILDING, managing director, Cleaning and Environmental Services, Mitie

