Building a career in facilities management

When Callie O’Brien graduated from Wentworth Institute of Technology in 2009 with a degree in facilities management, she did not pound the pavement looking for a job like most new grads. She did not even interview, but had four offers nonetheless and chose one — assistant project manager at Newton-based Diversified Project Management — where she is today.

In fact, all of the facilities management graduates she knew at Wentworth had jobs soon after they got out of school, O’Brien said. And not just any jobs, but jobs in their field and jobs they say they love.

“I have a lot of friends who majored in journalism, communications, advertising, and education and they’re so passionate. But they’re still looking for that perfect opportunity,” O’Brien said. “There’s a lot of great opportunities and work in (facilities management.)”

O’Brien represents the new face of a career — and the professionalization of an industry — that, in the old days, either was the work of janitorial staff or a path into which certain office workers fell.

Falling into it is how Kate Thibeault, facilities director for Pearson, described her entrée nearly 30 years ago. She got into property management straight out of college and later worked at Nutter McClennen & Fish, running the secretarial pool, then the mail and copy services. Within a year, she said, she was the law firm’s facilities coordinator.

Today, Thibeault runs Pearson’s facilities in Boston and Washington D.C., managing the publisher’s real estate and strategy issues, the workplace database systems and the like.

But as buildings have become more complex and with more sophisticated systems, facilities managers — like O’Brien — are beginning to go to school for the job.

“You need to be able to crawl under the desk to do something but you have to be able to talk to the CEO when he walks by,” said Dawn Borden, a facilities management consultant in Sherborn.

The International Facility Management Association (IFMA) in Texas accredits 21 masters and undergraduate programs in facilities management in North America, said Steve Lockwood, director of academic affairs for the IFMA Foundation.
Wentworth is the only school in Massachusetts offering an undergraduate degree in facilities management and is now recruiting for its first master’s degree class to start next fall.

All schools and programs report a nearly 100 percent job placement for students upon graduation, Lockwood said, and upward mobility looks bright.

Fifty-percent of facility managers are expected to retire over the next 15 years, according to IFMA. In addition, a 2011 IFMA study shows that the base salary for facilities managers has increased 8 percent since 2007, with the average base salary of $91,778 in 2011.

Over 30 years, buildings and office environments have grown more complex, making a college degree in the field almost a necessity to get started, said those including those who do not have such degrees. A facilities manager must know how to design office and workspace in ways that make workers more productive, as well as understanding health and safety issues, security, sustainability, technology and heating and cooling systems that today are run by computers.

“Businesses have recognized the value of the asset and expect more of us,” said Anthony Leonard, Northeast regional facility manager for Liberty Mutual, who got his start in the field as a property management trainee for The Flatley Company in the 1980s.

Leonard spends significant time on utility related issues — finding less expensive ways to operate the building’s systems, understanding environmental regulations and the like.

“Now we’re looking at the long-term cost of occupancy for three-to-five years so (departments) can build it in their budgets,” Leonard said. “The overall cost of occupancy and how it will impact the business over the long term.”