

FM professional profile

Elaine Robertson, CFM

By Tom Kelly

Director Property Services, MTS Allstream Inc., Winnipeg

It was 1997. The Red River flooded in Manitoba, and Elaine Robertson spent one of the most memorable days of her FM career with Manitoba Telecom Services (MTS). Flying by helicopter to inspect a remote network switching site, all she could see below, she says, “was water to the horizon in every direction.”

Today, she is at what she says is a career highlight. MTS acquired communications firm Allstream in 2004, and she is engrossed in the integration of their facilities. She manages approximately 2000 facilities, from small switching sites to 250,000 square feet of new office space in Toronto, offices in Winnipeg and elsewhere, a 800-seat call centre under construction, retail stores, warehouses, and major switching stations. Between 20 and 30 construction and renovation projects are currently underway.

In the integration of the two corporations, she, her team and consultants developed a property plan, she says, “that looked at where people were being reduced, what were our most beneficial financial leases, what properties we would dispose of, what we would improve and how we would be funded.”

The last person was moved in this reorganization on December 3, 2005, and before the year was out MTS announced a further consolidation. “So we’re now dispensing with more space and doing more integration.”

While all this is underway, switching stations are being upgraded to improve network access in the north, and day-to-day operation and maintenance carry on via a new national call centre.

Blending cultures

Integration of both corporations’ facility departments has required the blending of different cultures and amalgamation of data from two SAP enterprise management systems. Her staff of 70

span interior designers, engineers, project managers, building operators, finance people, two people with Masters degrees in facility management, regional FMs in Calgary and Montreal, a lawyer who manages a right-of-way group, and IT specialists dedicated to property information management.

“We look at what is most critical for us to do in house,” Ms Robertson says. “We can buy services but we can’t buy the knowledge and history of our in-house people. We look carefully at our processes to make the best use of our staff and are constantly seeking to improve.”

Finding an executive champion

An interior designer herself, with a degree in design from the University of Manitoba, she started her career designing store layouts in Toronto for Eaton’s. She joined MTS in Winnipeg 25 years ago and has been able to “network my way up to the highest level in the corporation,” she says. It is important for FMs, she says, to find a champion at the executive level and “to show executives how much money you save them in facilities.” She took the opportunity to do so when a relocation of the corporate head office from a suburb to downtown Winnipeg put her in front of executives to make presentations.

From her early days with MTS, she has remained close to a group of other women managers in different departments who share knowledge and experience. All have reached high positions and met the challenges of being women in a traditionally male-dominated industry. She is bringing her experience to bear on the corporation’s culture as a member of the CEO’s advisory committee on a gender diversity program.

“Women approach things from a different perspective than men do and often have a different approach to prob-



lems,” she says. “Especially in team building, women are generally more sensitive to other

people’s feelings and can connect differently.”

MTS, “which has fabulous development programs for leaders,” she says, has supported her in training that took her to the University of Western Ontario for an executive management course.

She has been a member of the Professional Interior Designers of Manitoba and the Interior Designers of Canada. She has benefited greatly from IFMA membership in education at meetings and conferences, and in networking with other FMs. She was a founding member and president of the IFMA Manitoba chapter and vice president of northwest region. As an IFMA Director in the early 1990s, she among a test group who wrote the first CFM exam. She helped to set up a Master’s program in FM at the University of Manitoba. Although it graduated 25 people, two of whom work for her, she regrets it ran for only a year.

FM education tends to be selective, in her view, and FMs must learn wherever they can. No-one can be expert in all broadening aspects of FM.

Given the pressures of modern business, it is vital, she adds, to set firm priorities to maintain a balance with a personal life. Among her priorities are her family, grandchildren, aging parents, and to take care of herself. She works out to keep fit and travels on vacation to exotic parts of the world. Without that, she says, she can’t perform at her peak.

Not all her working days are as adventurous as the day in the Red River flood, but every day brings with it the unexpected.

What is important, she says, is “to have a passion for what you do.”