ESTATES LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

HOW CAPABILITY IS BEING REDEFINED ACROSS THE UK

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 18 months, the expectations placed on estates and property functions have shifted materially.

What was once viewed as an operational discipline is now central to organisational performance. Estates leaders are increasingly tasked with navigating complex capital programmes, responding to regulatory pressure, delivering against sustainability commitments, and ensuring that physical assets actively support wider organisational strategy.

These demands are not theoretical. They are shaping hiring decisions in real time.

Drawing on MRG's experience delivering more than 200 executive and senior leadership appointments across estates, property and built environment functions in the UK over the past 18 months, this report provides an evidence-based view of how leadership expectations are evolving. While the findings are drawn from UK appointments, they are informed by MRG's wider experience as an international real estate executive search and talent advisory firm operating across the UK, Middle East and Asia.

This is not simply a story of hiring activity, but of a function being redefined through the capability it requires.

A MARKET MOVING BEYOND FUNCTIONAL SILOS

One of the most consistent observations across recent appointments is the decline of siloed hiring. Organisations are no longer building estates functions in discrete parts, strategy in one place, delivery in another, operations elsewhere. Instead, there is a deliberate move towards more integrated leadership teams, where accountability spans across the full lifecycle of the estate.

This shift is visible in the profile of roles being appointed. Senior hires are increasingly expected to operate across capital delivery, operational performance, compliance, and long-term asset strategy simultaneously.

Over the past 18 months, this has been reflected in sustained demand for Director and Head-level appointments across estates, property, and capital functions, with a notable increase in deputy and associate director roles designed to bridge strategic intent and day-to-day execution.

For HR Directors and COOs, this presents a more complex challenge. The question is no longer whether talent exists within a given discipline, but whether individuals can operate effectively across multiple, interdependent areas of responsibility.

Seen in isolation, these shifts can appear incremental. Viewed across multiple organisations over time, a different pattern emerges, one of deliberate structural change in how estates capability is defined and built.

THE REBALANCING OF STRATEGY AND TECHNICAL DEPTH

Alongside this broader shift, there has been a quiet but significant rebalancing in how organisations value technical expertise.

While strategic leadership remains critical, there is increasing recognition that estates performance is often determined at the technical level, within engineering capability, asset management frameworks, and compliance infrastructure.

This is reflected in the volume and consistency of appointments at this level. Over the past 18 months, there has been sustained demand for roles spanning technical services leadership, M&E expertise, asset management, and health and safety. In many cases, these appointments sit directly alongside senior strategic hires, rather than beneath them.

The implication is clear. Organisations are not simply investing in leadership; they are investing in technical credibility as a foundation for performance.

For executive teams, this introduces a different kind of hiring risk. Technical capability is often harder to evaluate, less visible at interview, and more consequential over time. Yet it is increasingly central to the resilience and effectiveness of the estate.

In practice, this is where many organisations encounter the greatest degree of ambiguity, technical credibility is increasingly critical, yet often the most difficult element to benchmark with confidence.

CAPITAL DELIVERY UNDER GREATER SCRUTINY

Capital programmes continue to represent one of the most visible pressures on estates functions. Across the appointments made during this period, there has been consistent demand for project and programme leadership, from senior project managers through to programme directors and heads of capital delivery.

However, the expectations attached to these roles have evolved. Delivery alone is no longer sufficient. There is a growing emphasis on individuals who can align capital projects with wider organisational outcomes, whether that be financial performance, user experience, sustainability targets, or long-term asset value.

This is particularly evident in complex environments such as higher education and healthcare, where stakeholder groups are broad, funding structures are nuanced, and the consequences of underperformance are significant.

As a result, organisations are placing greater weight on judgement, stakeholder management, and strategic alignment when appointing into these roles, criteria that are often more difficult to assess than technical delivery capability alone.

This is not limited to the UK. Similar patterns are evident across international markets, reinforcing the extent to which estates performance is now seen as a strategic lever rather than a functional responsibility.

OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

At the same time, the operational dimension of the estate has moved further up the organisational agenda.

Demand for facilities management leadership, campus operations roles, and property management professionals remains consistently high. However, these roles are now framed differently.

Rather than focusing solely on service delivery, organisations are increasingly linking operational performance to broader strategic outcomes; space utilisation, user experience, cost efficiency, and ultimately organisational effectiveness.

This is particularly evident in portfolio environments where estates complexity is high and expectations around performance continue to increase.

It is also reflected in the frequency of appointments made at this level over the past 18 months, indicating that operational leadership is now being treated as a critical lever, rather than a supporting function.

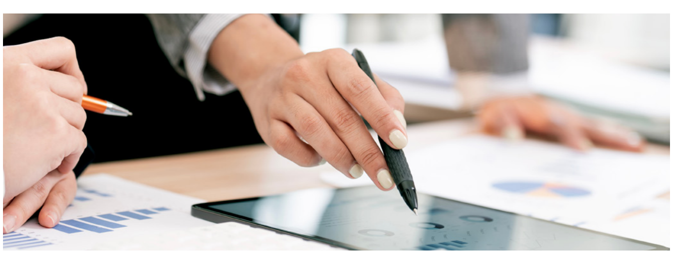
Across the organisations we have supported, hiring decisions are increasingly interdependent. Leadership, technical capability, and commercial delivery are being considered together, rather than sequentially.

This has implications not just for how roles are defined, but for how organisations approach the process of identifying and assessing talent.

A MARKET DEFINED BY DEPTH, NOT VOLUME

Perhaps the most telling characteristic of the current market is not the volume of hiring, but its depth.

Across the past 18 months, MRG has supported a significant volume of appointments across leadership, technical expertise, capital delivery, and commercial capability, with particularly strong concentration in higher education, healthcare, and complex property portfolios.



In several cases, this has involved supporting multiple appointments within the same organisation over an extended period, providing a clearer view of how estates functions evolve in practice, rather than in theory.

This reflects a shift away from transactional hiring towards a more strategic approach to leadership capability. Increasingly, organisations are viewing executive search not as a recruitment exercise, but as a long-term investment in organisational performance.

For HR Directors and COOs, this raises a more strategic question. It is not simply about accessing talent when required. It is about ensuring that appointments, over time, contribute to a coherent, high-performing estates structure.

THE COST OF GETTING IT RIGHT AND WRONG

The estates function now sits at the intersection of risk, performance, and long-term value.

Appointments made within this function carry a disproportionate impact on capital programmes, compliance exposure, operational efficiency, and ultimately organisational outcomes.

Yet the complexity of these roles has increased faster than the mechanisms typically used to assess them.

As a result, the margin for error has narrowed.

Those organisations that are taking a more considered, structured approach to estates hiring, treating it as a strategic capability rather than a series of individual vacancies, are beginning to differentiate.

Others continue to operate within more traditional models, often at greater risk.

A FINAL OBSERVATION

Across the organisations we have supported during this period, one consistent theme has emerged.

The most effective estates functions are not built through isolated hires. They are shaped over time, through a clear understanding of the capability required, and a disciplined approach to appointing it.

That process is rarely visible from the outside. It is, however, increasingly deliberate and increasingly critical.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

At MRG, we partner with organisations across the UK, Middle East and Asia to attract, recruit and develop the leadership talent shaping the built environment. If the themes explored in this report resonate with your organisation, we'd welcome the opportunity to share what we're seeing across the wider market and discuss how these trends compare with your own leadership challenges.

GET IN TOUCH WITH US AT TALK@MRGGLOBAL.COM