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**THE OUTSOURCING OF CORPORATE REAL ESTATE  
MANAGEMENT – HOW DO CORPORATE REAL ESTATE  
UNITS AND OUTSOURCE SERVICE PROVIDERS VIEW EACH  
OTHER AND THE MANAGEMENT ISSUES?**

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**Abstract:** Outsourcing of corporate real estate management is a long-established practice in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Europe and Australia. While the imperatives for outsourcing have been widely studied, there has been little research into the nature of the working relationship between the corporate real estate unit and the outsource service provider. The paper discusses, by reference to the literature, the issues involved in this working relationship. Methodologies for exploratory and final studies are explored by reference to the literature and other corporate real estate studies. Findings of exploratory studies in Australia are presented.

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a fairly brief guide to the ground covered by the author in the preliminary research design, literature review and exploratory research phases of a doctoral thesis. This is put forward with a view to obtaining the viewpoints of other property researchers who may be interested in the corporate real estate management field, so advice and constructive criticism would be welcomed.

The genesis of the idea for the research in question was observation by the author in the United States in 1996, of an apparently large disparity between the views of corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers on their relationship and the competence of their partner organisation. This apparent dichotomy is reinforced by the literature.

## **Corporate Real Estate**

“Corporate real estate” is a term that is generally used in a broad sense to refer to real estate owned by a corporation, whether it is for investment or for use. The study that is the subject of this paper narrows the definition to that freehold or leasehold real estate that is used by an organisation for its own productive purposes, whether or not the corporation also considers the same real estate to be an investment.

The term “corporation” is used to refer to any medium to large organisation, most certainly including public companies, private companies, government organisations, public institutions and not-for-profits (Joroff et al 1993). It is difficult to pinpoint a particular size of organisation to use as a cut-off point – the main criterion should be that the corporate real estate plays a significant role in the productive process and that its management requires the dedicated services of specialist people.

“Real estate management” is another term that may be construed broadly or narrowly, matching the range of functions that a corporate real estate unit may be called upon to perform. Corporate real estate functions may include planning and execution of real estate acquisition and disposal; space management; interior planning and installation; architectural and engineering services; maintenance and operations; capital and operational budgeting (Mole & Taylor 1992); organisational cost control; financial value creation; real estate entrepreneurialism; business strategy formulation and implementation (Joroff et al 1993).

It would seem appropriate to leave the definition broad, as the study is more concerned with the outsourcing process and relationships, than with the nature of particular tasks.

### **Outsourcing, Partnering and Alliances**

Elmuti et al (1998) refer to a 1995 study by the Economist Intelligence Unit and Arthur Andersen, noting that 85% of all executives in North America and Europe outsource all or at least part of one business function. The figure was expected to rise to 93% by 1998 and globally, outsourcing was expected to be a US\$121 billion market by the year 2000. Yet Rothery and Robertson (1995) refer to a survey of 50 top executives revealing “extensive ignorance” of outsourcing.

Outsourcing could be defined as employing an outside agency to manage a function formerly carried on inside the company (Rothery & Robertson 1995). D’Aveni (1994), Rothery and Robinson (1995) and Joroff et al (1993) variously refer to the drivers of Outsourcing as being business process re-engineering, including value re-engineering, time compression and value chain analysis; organisational restructuring (reinventing); competition and the ever-faster erosion of competitive advantage; changing technology; cost control.

Elmuti et al (1998) refer to the main long-term reasons for outsourcing as:

- To free resources for other (core business) purposes
- To share risks with the outsource provider, who is probably more tuned in to the risks inherent in their specialty
- To accelerate re-engineering benefits. Re-engineering takes some time to put into place and longer for the benefits to be realised. Outsourcing enables a “world class practice” specialist to take over immediately

Short-term reasons identified by Elmuti et al (1998) were:

- To assist with a function that is difficult to manage or out of control. This is a short-term fix, because if there are long-term internal problems, they are likely to exist externally as well, and be more difficult to fix.
- To use resources that are not available internally, through lack of cash, facilities or technology. In the longer term, feasibility of acquiring resources versus continuing to outsource should be examined
- To reduce and control operating costs through the outsource service provider’s economies of scale. This was identified as the primary reason to outsource.

Lacity, Willcocks and Feeny (1995) concluded that the company’s objective should be to maximise both flexibility and control by fostering competition among suppliers. Cross (1995) provides a case study of outsourcing of IT at British Petroleum, which had experimented with selective outsourcing and found that managing disparate contracts required far more management resources than the contracts were worth. BP eventually hired three outsource contractors and required them to work together to deliver a single seamless IT service to BP’s 42 businesses around the world.

Outsourcing of the whole business process is relatively new in the whole scheme of things (Wood 1997), whereas outsourcing of relatively minor functions has been around for a lot longer. The latter is often referred to as out-tasking with all out-tasking being outsourcing, but not all outsourcing being out-tasking.

In the CRE sense, outsourcing of the cleaning of buildings would be out-tasking, whereas outsourcing of the CRE function would be called outsourcing. King (1998) refers to the demise in the Information Technology industry of the “single-source, megabucks outsourcing deal”. Instead, IT managers are out-tasking niche services to multiple vendors.

At the other end of the outsourcing scale from out-tasking is the concept of Alliancing or Partnership, defined as a strategy to achieve higher performance and /or lower costs through joint, mutually dependent action of independent organisations or individuals (Rothery & Robinson 1995). Partnership is the natural evolution of outsourcing. Outsourcing is based on achieving service levels set out in a service agreement, while partnerships are based on issues like cultural fit. Joroff et al (1993) refer to “partnering” in the context of corporations using outsource suppliers for the more strategic CRE work.

Kanter (1994) contends that inter-company alliances do not work well with the rational, technical, contractual approach so beloved of Western management. Rather, she observes that they tend to meet the following criteria, which also serve well to differentiate alliancing from outsourcing:

- Individual Excellence – both partners are strong in their core competencies and have something of value to contribute to the relationship
- Importance – partners have long-term goals in which the relationship play a key role
- Interdependence – the partners need each other
- Investment – the partners show tangible signs of long term commitment by devoting financial and other resources to the relationship
- Information – partners share information required to make the relationship work, including objectives and goals, technical data and knowledge of conflicts, trouble-spots and changing situations
- Integration – partners build broad connections between many people at different organisational levels, becoming both teachers and learners
- Institutionalisation – the relationship is given formal status, with clear responsibilities and decision processes, so that the partnership can survive the people who initially put it together
- Integrity – the partners behave honourably, enhance mutual trust, do not abuse confidential information and do not seek to undermine each other

Not all of the outsourcing literature refers to the benefits and techniques. Moran and Taylor (1998) refer to sources of risk inherent in the decision to outsource:

- Vicarious liability for the actions of others of which you may not be aware, or in which you may not be fully involved
- Becoming an ignorant customer through the atrophy of internal management and technical skills, until you become unable to competently specify and manage the outsourced activity
- Losing the capacity to profit from the benefits of future productivity enhancement in changing industries or markets, by trading rights of first access to the outsource service provider

- Creating a self-imposed monopoly by emphasising the short term transaction cost savings of having one outsource service provider over the long term strategic benefits of a healthy and competitive market to supply

Burman (1998) outlines the dilemma faced by governments in deciding where to draw the line on outsourcing. It is suggested that the final decision-making can not be outsourced, but the grey area occurs in deciding how much in-house expertise is needed to make the final decision. In particular, it is necessary to recognise what are the core competencies and not to outsource them, and to understand that managing external resources takes a different set of skills from managing the same skills internally.

### **The Outsourcing Relationship**

There is considerable literature and empirical evidence on the outsourcing of CRE services. By and large, the principles followed are those outlined above. For example, Parker (1997) studied the outsourcing of CRE functions in the US and UK, and listed the following things that a service provider needs to offer, besides the cost-effective provision of the CRE service itself:

- The service must be the core business of the service provider
- Superior knowledge, technology and experience
- Ability to access world best practice in technology and people
- Broad geographic capability combined with detailed and reliable local knowledge
- Established quality control including customer satisfaction programs, TQM and commitment to continuous improvement
- Appropriately capitalised business with an established philosophy, management depth and stability
- A key contact person in the same city
- The undivided attention of the service provider
- Mutual dependency, the willingness to share risk and the ability to build long-term relationships
- The person within the service provider who sold the service should also be the one who performs the service
- Commitment and willingness to share knowledge
- Ability to absorb the volume of outsourcing work without response times becoming too slow
- Efficiency gains from economies of scale, with the service provider spreading personnel across several clients, subject to confidentiality in sensitive areas
- Relevantly educated and trained staff who are offered real career paths and upward mobility in order to attract and retain good people
- Experience from both a landlord's and a tenant's viewpoint and familiarity with CRE
- Provide a combination of services, alone or with others, that are required by corporations

Hagy (1998), Ronco (1998), Englert (1998) and Crabtree (1998) reached similar conclusions that the process of arriving at a sound CRE outsourcing relationship is an opportunity to explore and establish common expectations and goals.

Miller (1991) confirms the author’s observation that views on outsourcing tend to be discussed often and passionately among corporate real estate executives. At the International Development Research Council’s Spring 1996 Conference in Philadelphia, an electronic questionnaire to 550 delegates produced answers, which tended to be in line with the positions mentioned (The IDRC Foundation 1996). For example, in response to the question “Does your corporation have a clear business vision (not just CRE) for where it wants to be in two years?” 21.7% of corporate real estate executive respondents said “no” or “don’t know”. In response to the question “Do the companies you work with have a clear business vision for where they want to be in two years?” 68.3% of outsource service provider respondents said “no” or “don’t know”. For the same questions about outsource service providers’ business visions, 36.1% of outsource service provider respondents and 68.7% of corporate real estate executive respondents said “no” or “don’t know”.

A question asking respondents to describe corporate real estate leadership produced the following responses (Table 1.):

*Table 1. IDRC Corporate Real Estate Leadership Survey*

	Corporate Real Estate Executives’ Description of their Leadership Role in their Companies	Outsource Service Providers’ Observation of Corporate Real Estate Leadership in their Clients’ Companies
Transaction and Project Management Role (Taskmasters)	34.5%	65.9%
Enabling Role (Controllers and Dealmakers)	32.7%	21.5%
Catalyst Role (Intrapreneurs and Business Strategists)	32.7%	12.3%

Hines (1996) proposes an action plan so that corporate real estate executives can deal with outsourcing. He advocates that the corporate real estate executive should define the role of corporate real estate and strengthen key relationships and communication channels within the corporation, before conducting a cost-benefit assessment of outsourcing on a function-by-function basis. The corporate real estate executive should then manage the outsourcing process from tendering through ongoing performance management.

While this is the counsel of perfection, Gingold (1997), writing from the viewpoint of an outsource service provider, maintains that the initial appeal of outsourcing to the corporation – immediate cost savings and continued economies – tends to drive the outside service provider’s service offering. Outsource service providers compete for corporate work on the basis of promised cost savings to the corporation. They make the appeal to senior management, often over the heads of corporate real estate executives, in effect setting the outsourcing agenda. In the drive to reduce costs to the corporation, and thus meet their promises, outsource service providers tend to lower service and support standards, to the detriment of the operation of the corporation’s business units.

Michaelree (1997) adds some further perspective to the problem. He argues that an outsource service provider may have access to formal insider knowledge like business goals, practices, strategies, tactics and budgets, but not to the less definable knowledge like company culture and people knowledge. On loyalty, he argues that the insider will tend to vigilantly defend, protect and advocate the corporation's interests. The outsource service provider, on the other hand, has a legal obligation to do no harm, while seeking self-gain.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

Arising from the problem identified in the previous section, is the formulation of suitable research questions that address the problem. Broadly, the question is: Is there a significant difference between corporate real estate executives and outsource service provider executives in their perceptions of:

- the decision rules for outsourcing of various corporate real estate functions,
- the matters that are important if outsourcing is to be successful,
- the needs of their business unit customers,
- performance measurement and
- their relationship with each other?

The following alternate hypotheses are proposed:

- There is a significant difference between factors respectively perceived by corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers to be important to a successful outsourcing contract
- Corporate real estate executives are significantly more knowledgeable than outsource service providers about the real estate needs of their business unit customers
- Corporate real estate executives are significantly more likely to favour performance measurement than are outsource service providers
- Corporate real estate executives have a significantly lower opinion of outsource service providers' motivations and competence than do the outsource service providers themselves
- Corporate real estate executives have a significantly higher opinion of their ability to communicate objectives and key information to outsource service providers than do outsource service providers themselves
- Corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers with an alliance mentality are perceived as significantly more successful by business units, than are corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers with an outsourcing mentality.

### **Methodological Issues**

Exploratory research in the form of secondary data analysis and experience surveys has, and continues to be, carried out to identify and clarify methodological issues.

Secondary data analysis in this context consists of reviewing data collected for another purpose, in order to clarify issues in the preliminary stages of research (Zikmund 1997).

In the review of literature used in establishing the research question, there is useful quantitative and qualitative information that has been and will be of assistance in research design. There have been a number of corporate real estate studies conducted, especially in the United States, which provide information on methodology, including sample selection, survey design, response rates and survey questions. Examples of secondary data pertaining to methodology include:

- Lambert, Poteete and Waltch (1995), obtained a high response rate from outsource service providers by obtaining referrals from their corporate clients. This is an approach that has considerable attraction for the current study, in that it should help in obtaining cooperation from outsource service providers, who would like to be seen as cooperative by their clients.
- The IDRC Foundation (1996), as noted in section 2.1, conducted interactive surveys at a major corporate real estate conference. Although the technology used to provide instantaneous analysis and feedback of results on a question-by-question basis is not accessible to this researcher, the technique of surveying conference attendees is worthy of consideration.
- IDRC and Ernst and Young (1996a & 1996b) used faxed questionnaire surveys followed up with short telephone interviews to obtain information for their Corporate Real Estate 2000 Asia-Pacific and European surveys. These were aimed at finding how much had corporate real estate been integrated into broader corporate thinking, and at finding examples of better ways for corporate real estate to be useful for businesses. The faxed or e-mailed questionnaire is a potentially useful technique for sampling a population of relatively large businesses, who would all have the requisite technology. The IDRC/Ernst and Young studies survey sample groups drawn from 20 industry sectors that were also used by Joroff et al (1993) and Lambert Poteete and Waltch (1995) in their respective studies. Using the same industry sectors would make the current research potentially more useful in respect of its comparability with international research into similar areas.
- Richard Muther & Associates (1992) used a maturity matrix that measured five increasingly better levels of performance for various facility management practices. For example, respondents were asked to indicate the stage of maturity that best described their organisation's strategic intent, from the following list: no thought to mission; open disagreement; unwritten but known to "insiders"; written and available on a "need to know" basis; widely circulated and signed by a senior executive. The researchers argue that the resulting survey is extremely compact and not very time consuming, assures a high degree of comparative analysis among respondents, and avoids value-laden, and difficult-to-compare, terms like "poor", "good" and "average". This is an interesting approach as an alternative to Likert Scale questionnaires, although it requires a good deal of prior knowledge to construct and would not lend itself to factor analysis of a range of questions. It could perhaps be useful as a supplementary method for key questions.
- JLW Research (1991) in their survey of Australian property asset management used the total market value of organisations' property assets as their criterion for sample selection. It is possible in some States of Australia to access property ownership lists and thus to replicate the approach. The problem is that, as Webster (1995) noted, the object of interest is occupation and management of corporate real estate, which is increasingly being leased rather than owned.

Zikmund (1996) defines an experience survey as “an exploratory research technique in which individuals who are knowledgeable about a particular research problem are surveyed”. There are numerous examples in the literature of the use of experience surveys.

Through real estate professional organisations, joint research projects and current employer, the author has enlisted the cooperation of real estate practitioners engaged in corporate real estate units and managing services in outsource service providers. It is intended to conduct semi-structured or focused individual interviews with some of these respondents, as well as some new respondents, to assist in questionnaire design. Respondents would be from private industry, government and not-for-profit organisations; from secondary and tertiary industry; and from full-service and specialist service providers. This is designed to ensure that the peculiarities of particular sectors are allowed for. It is estimated that there would be 6 to 10 interviews of less than one hour’s duration. Aaker, Kumar and Day (1998) note that the technique of covering a specific list of topics or sub-areas that is characteristic of semi-structured interviews, is especially effective with the busy executives and technical experts who would comprise the interview subjects in the current study. Interviewees would be provided with a summary of the proposed research and broad interview topic areas prior to interviews, in order that they can familiarise themselves with the topic. Some interviewees have offered to provide written comments as well as the interview.

### **Major Methodology**

A quantitative approach has been decided on, in preference to qualitative methods such as case studies. Of the quantitative approaches that might be used, experimental, secondary data (including meta-analysis) and hybrid methods (including Delphi) have been discarded in favour of a survey approach.

Survey research is a technique for gathering primary data from a sample of the population being studied by use of questionnaires (Zikmund 1997). Section 3.2 covers the sampling issues, so this discussion is confined to justification, from the nature of the problem and the literature, of the choice of surveys as the major methodology in the current research.

Zikmund (1997) notes that typical survey objectives involve the discovery of group and individual characteristics, attitudes and behaviour. The current research is very much concerned with discovering the characteristics of corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers, and with describing their attitudes and behaviour towards outsourcing, contracts, business unit clients, performance measurement and each other.

Czaja and Blair (1996) note that survey research in any social science field is inherently interdisciplinary, relying on probability theory and statistics, psycholinguistics or sociolinguistics, cognitive psychology and management. Yet, people who would not claim to be experts in all of those disciplines carry out successful surveys all the time, by focusing on one stage at a time and drawing on key scientific principles, outside expertise and experience (Czaja & Blair 1996).

## Some Population and Sampling Considerations

Advance knowledge of population characteristics is essential to sample design (Zikmund 1997). A population consists of the entire group of subjects that share common characteristics of interest to the researcher (Zikmund 1997). Relating that definition to the research question, there are two populations of interest – corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers, or more specifically, senior executives of firms that supply real estate services. It is a crucial part of the research design that the population is not restricted to real estate executives who outsource, or to real estate service providers who are involved in outsourcing contracts with the corporate sector. That decision has been made because a study of attitudes to outsourcing issues and partners should include in the population, those who have chosen not to participate in outsourcing. Their reasons for not participating could include negative perceptions of outsourcing and potential outsource partners that would make a significant difference to the outcome of the research.

Preliminary exploration of the topic of outsourcing corporate real estate does suggest that non-participants are well informed of the issues and could account for them in their decisions regarding outsourcing. Table 2. below is a matrix of the population being studied. For the purposes of comparative analysis, it would be necessary to ensure that the populations in each element of the matrix are of sufficient size to allow a significant enough sample for comparison. There are also implications for survey design as discussed later.

*Table 2. Matrix of the Study Population*

	<b>CRE Executives</b>	<b>OSP Executives</b>
<i>Engaged in Outsourcing</i>	CRE executives who outsource major functions	OSPs that have significant CRE outsource contracts
<i>Not Engaged in Outsourcing</i>	CRE executives who do not outsource major functions	OSPs that do not have significant CRE outsource contracts

## Some Findings of Exploratory Interviews

Preliminary interviews were carried out with a number of corporate real estate executives, outsource service provider executives and heads of business units from a number of private sector, government and not-for-profit organisations. Although experiences varied, they tended to suggest that consideration was not often given to the ongoing working relationship when outsourcing arrangements were being considered.

It seems to have been common practice to assume from the outset that contractual obligations and formal decision-making and reporting arrangements were sufficient. In practice, it was then observed that they were not, because all possible circumstances had not, and arguably could not, be thought of when outsourcing arrangements were being put into place. Depending on the depth of commitment by the parties to the arrangement, this often led to people trying to enforce their legal rights, rather than to solve the particular problem.

It was notable that the level of the decision-making on outsourcing of corporate real estate functions affected the apparent commitment of the parties to the arrangements and the perceived success. It seemed that, very much in accordance with the literature and with management theory, when outsourcing of corporate real estate functions was dictated from the top, there was a lack of commitment from those not involved in the decision, and a perverse pleasure when things went wrong. When the outsourcing was generated at corporate real estate unit level, with appropriate consultation with business units on the arrangements and outsource service provider selection, the perception seemed to be that it all worked well.

In some respects, negative attitudes to outsourcing are to be expected as a product of change, with people justifying their opposition to change with convenient “evidence”. This is compounded because there is a tendency for outsourcing of corporate real estate services to be an integral part of, or concurrent with, other modern management phenomena such as downsizing and re-engineering.

Performance measurement was an interesting issue. In some cases, it was not even carried out in a formal sense. Where performance measurement was used, there seemed a reluctance to commit to this as part of the formal contractual arrangements, except where there were performance incentives built in. It was interesting that performance measurement often seemed to be introduced with outsourcing, and did not exist beforehand. The fact that it would then be impossible to observe whether outsourcing or doing the job in-house was the better option seemed not to worry the respondents.

What were quite notable, and in accordance with the literature, were the different perceptions of the success or failure of the same outsourcing by senior management, corporate real estate people, business unit “customers” and outsource service providers. Senior management tended to look at direct cost savings as may be noted by reading the financial and property press.

Corporate real estate people tended to look at the arrangement with a more or less jaundiced eye, depending on whether the outsourcing was imposed. They certainly looked at the performance of outsource service providers from a technical viewpoint, and tended to make unfavourable comparisons with the performance of their previous in-house team. They seemed to feel that there was pressure to save costs, because they are easy to measure, rather than to enhance productivity, which is difficult to measure in the short term. There was widespread suspicion of the motives of outsource service providers – a tendency to feel that they would do as little as they could get away with, in order to enhance their own profitability.

Business unit executives generally felt that they were not sufficiently consulted – that they were the forgotten part of the equation. Where business units had enjoyed a good relationship with the internal corporate real estate people, and were brought into the outsourcing process, business unit executives felt that outsourcing had been positive. Such good relationships seem to have been in the minority, however, with corporate real estate departments not seeing it as their role to liaise with business units. This has serious implications, given that the whole point of corporate real estate management is to enhance the profitability of the business.

When the author interviewed outsource service provider representatives in the United States in 1996, the main complaint appeared to be a lack of key information about the planning of the client's business, that would enable the outsource service provider to do a good job of corporate real estate. Outsource service providers felt that they were hamstrung in trying to do a proper job, by a lack of information from the corporation and by lack of direct access to business unit customers. This was borne out by the interviews conducted, with some outsource service providers keen to apply their expertise in a planning role, but being rebuffed by their client organisation. Some outsource service provider executives could see no difference between corporate real estate management and property management. They did not see themselves playing a strategic role for the client corporation, and were not asked to. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that corporate real estate in its true sense is fairly young in Australia, and outsourcing of that real estate is younger still.

Very few corporate real estate executives and outsource service providers appeared to be satisfied with their formal and informal relationships. There appeared to be a sense that, had they known what they know now, they would have done things differently. They were not quite sure what they would do, apart from fixing the obvious problems that had arisen. It seemed that the longer the pre-outsourcing history between the parties, the less likely was the relationship to have serious problems.

Preliminary interviews provided some expected and some surprising responses, which will be helpful in selection of respondents and design of the questionnaires. They provide a useful reference group against which to test ideas, and will be expanded as opportunity dictates. The interviews certainly indicated that there are a variety of more or less successful approaches to real estate outsourcing. The research should provide some guidance as to the approaches that are successful in an Australian context.

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