



Professional Cleaning in Practice 2026 Trends:

Driven by people, powered by innovation

Introduction

Stepping into 2026: Innovation, powered by people

This year's trend report highlights the professionals who make a difference by turning smart ideas into reliable, everyday results. Their knowledge, flexibility, and dedication drive the industry forward.

Automation and digitalisation do not replace people; they absorb repetitive and physically demanding tasks. This shift gives teams more time and responsibility to focus on oversight, problem-solving, and raising standards.



Facility managers and frontline teams can now concentrate on strategy: interpreting standards, deploying new systems, and maintaining high performance. Ultimately, human judgement and flexibility determine whether an innovation succeeds beyond planning.

Throughout these pages, we offer first-hand accounts and expert views to provide a practical perspective on how the industry is changing. Our aim is to support informed decision-making. In 2026, robotics, AI, data-driven methods, and circular systems are expected to grow, especially where they cut costs and benefit the environment. At the same time, cleanliness standards are rising, skill requirements are increasing, and solutions are becoming more sector-specific. The demands on the industry's workforce have never been greater, but neither have the opportunities for innovation and creativity.





TREND 1:

Sustainability moves deeper into day-to-day operations

Sustainability has evolved away from targets, certifications, and pilot programmes towards everyday practice.¹ Resource-efficient systems are now central to routine cleaning, with a focus on reducing water, energy, and chemical use in measurable ways. The question is no longer whether improvements are possible, but how consistently savings can be delivered across sites, shifts, and teams. These outcomes directly impact operating costs and increasingly matter to clients.

Sustainability is also becoming more systemic. Circular thinking is moving into daily operations, particularly around packaging, product use, and waste reduction. Instead of isolated improvements, companies are considering how products are supplied, reused, refilled, and recovered across their entire operation.²

Product and service innovation

A range of technologies is supporting the shift towards more efficient, controlled, and resource-aware cleaning. Innovations include:

1. Dry steam cleaners and low-moisture systems use heat and pressure to minimise water consumption while maintaining effective cleaning and sanitisation.
2. Smart dosing and dilution systems ensure accurate mixing of water and chemicals, reducing waste and producing consistent results.
3. Cold-water detergents match the performance of hot-water products, use less energy, and shorten wash times.³
4. Advanced cleaning chemicals work quickly, require lower volumes, and leave less residue—boosting efficiency and precision.
5. Packaging innovation: refillable, concentrated, and reusable options reduce material use and simplify logistics.

¹How Green Is Cleaning Tech? - ECJ.

²2026 Household & Cleaning Trend Report.

³Chill Out!: Why Cold Water Is the Hottest Trend in Laundry.



Challenges and opportunities

Effective use requires thoughtful human inputs and oversight. Dry steam systems require clear guidance on where and how long to clean. Smart dosing and refill systems depend on correct installation, maintenance, and training.

Organisations can thrive by approaching sustainability strategically rather than simply investing in new equipment. Clear procedures, training, and accountability enable consistent reductions in water, energy, chemical use, and waste.

Buyers are also becoming more selective. Requests for measurable data, such as water use per task, chemical consumption per site, or packaging recovery rates, allow clients to assess performance rather than rely on claims.

“Buyers are no longer satisfied with broad sustainability statements; they are increasingly asking for verifiable, task-level data that shows how sustainability is delivered in practice,”

says Reneé Remijnse, Global Director of Sustainability Communications at Essity's Professional Hygiene Division.

Impact on the cleaning industry

In 2026, efficient use of water, energy, chemicals, and materials will be a baseline expectation, with success defined by consistent delivery rather than isolated innovation.

- Reducing resource use leads to cost savings, safer working conditions, and improved consistency.
- Managers benefit from greater visibility in budgeting, compliance, and sustainability reporting.
- Building owners gain confidence in meeting sustainability targets while maintaining performance.
- Manufacturers are expected to offer scalable, user-friendly solutions with clear guidance and refill systems.





TREND 2:

Automation supporting people, not replacing them

Professional cleaners continue to face labour shortages, while clients expect greater consistency, longer service hours, and increased transparency.

As hiring remains challenging for physically demanding and repetitive roles, robots and AI can support the daily work of limited teams. These technologies handle routine tasks, allowing people to supervise quality, manage outcomes, and solve complex problems.

Human roles within the cleaning industry are becoming more demanding and engaging. New positions such as robot supervisors, data analysts, and digitally skilled site managers strengthen professionalism, improve career pathways, and help address long-standing retention challenges.

Avril McCarthy, President of the Irish Contract Cleaning Association and EFCI, has highlighted that automation is essential for future-proofing the sector because it supports people rather than replacing them.⁴

Product and service innovation

Innovations include:

- Robots provide consistent cleaning in high-traffic areas and operate beyond standard hours.
- Automation helps contractors maintain service despite labour shortages and allows staff to focus on specialised tasks.
- Data-driven automation gives managers better visibility and more responsive performance.
- Integration of robots with IoT sensors and AI platforms enables adaptive cleaning and predictive maintenance.
- Human supervisors remain vital for interpreting data and making real-time decisions.

Challenges and opportunities

Governance is the challenge. Robots require supervision and calibration and do not always handle exceptions well. People are needed to interpret data

and respond creatively. Without oversight, automation risks underperforming or creating new issues.

Regulation adds further complexity. As Avril McCarthy has noted, the industry must prepare for the EU AI Act and related national regulations. Compliance will shape how AI-driven systems are deployed, particularly around data collection and automated decision-making. Rising expectations for transparency and responsible use reinforce the central role of people.⁵

“The future of cleaning will be shaped by both technological progress and the expertise of people on the ground. Facility managers and cleaning professionals are at the heart of creating safer, healthier environments.”

Industry impact & future outlook

By 2026, automation will support many cleaning operations, while responsibility and decision-making will remain with people.

- Automation will become standard for repetitive and high-traffic cleaning tasks.
- Human supervision and oversight will remain essential to maintain quality and address exceptions.
- New technical and supervisory roles will support career development and employee retention.
- Regulation and transparency will increasingly influence the deployment of automated systems.

⁴Cleaning Industry Insights with Avril McCarthy (President of EFCI).

⁵Robotics – A Question of Security.





TREND 3:

AI is helping people with planning, quality, and control

As automation takes over some existing processes, AI is also changing how other processes work at a deeper level. For example, traditional fixed schedules and manual inspections are becoming less effective. In response, many companies are exploring how digitalisation can improve cleaning operations through tools that can identify areas that need attention, monitor outcomes, and streamline processes. Integrated systems analyse real-time data to support managers in making informed decisions and allocating resources more efficiently. This approach enables a shift from reactive problem-solving to proactive planning.

Product and service innovation

Innovations include:

- AI-powered systems collect and analyse data from robots, sensors, building controls, and inspection reports
- AI identifies patterns, highlights overlooked issues, and optimises schedules based on occupancy and risk
- High-traffic areas receive more frequent cleaning
- Digital systems enable continuous, data-driven quality checks, anomaly detection, and predictive maintenance⁶
- Drones improve safety in window cleaning by eliminating the need for scaffolding
- AI-driven systems support documentation, verification, and maintenance planning

Manufacturers are prioritising digitalisation, integrating software, data, and support with machinery to deliver user-friendly, comprehensive solutions

Challenges and opportunities

For the cleaning industry, the human role in using AI is most visible in three areas: integration, consistency, and implementation. Without human leadership to guide AI, ensure data quality and consistency, act on recommendations, and identify blind spots or errors, AI can be ineffective or even risky.

This is echoed in other operational sectors. As Aster Meert of SULO Benelux explains, “Smart systems don’t succeed because of the technology. They succeed because of the people behind them.”

AI can support planning and oversight, but final decisions and accountability remain human responsibilities.



Industry impact & future outlook

AI will increasingly shape how cleaning is planned, monitored, and verified, while human judgement remains central to accountability and quality.

- Data-driven planning replaces fixed schedules, improving efficiency and risk control
- Managers rely more on real-time insights to allocate resources and oversee performance
- Transparency, data governance, and regulatory compliance become operational priorities
- Organisations that combine AI capability with skilled leadership achieve more consistent outcomes

⁶Digital Auditing – From Oversight to Insight.



TREND 4:

Cleaning and hygiene: supporting people's health, wellbeing and trust

Cleaning is increasingly fundamental to creating healthier, safer environments and improving air quality. Yet, relying heavily on strong chemicals can lead to respiratory issues, skin irritation, and chemical build-up, which undermine cleaning's health benefits.⁷ True cleanliness goes beyond appearance, requiring careful choices that protect both people and the spaces they use.⁸

As a result, companies are moving away from harsh chemicals towards products that are safe for frequent use. Product labelling now offers clearer information about ingredients, often verified by independent experts. Meanwhile, durable products that protect surfaces help reduce the need for frequent reapplication.

Product and service innovation

Innovations include:

- Low-residue and fast-acting detergents and disinfectants that clean effectively while reducing chemical build-up on surfaces and in the air
- Ready-to-use and controlled-dose products that limit over-application and reduce exposure risks for cleaning teams
- Foams, wipes, and pre-impregnated systems that minimise aerosols and overspray compared with traditional sprays
- Products aligned with health-focused building standards such as WELL and LEED, supporting air quality and occupant wellbeing
- Surface-protective formulations that extend cleaning intervals and reduce the need for frequent reapplication

⁷Top Trends in Hygiene and Care Product Manufacturing for 2026.

⁸Cleaning Operatives' Health – Taking Responsibility.

Challenges and opportunities

Meeting higher health and safety standards isn't always straightforward. As Don Lewis, Global Sector Director, Healthcare & Hygiene, Essity, explains "hygiene is about much more than cleanliness. It plays a fundamental role in protecting health, supporting wellbeing, and creating trust in shared spaces." Meeting the challenge takes research, testing, and investment to find compelling solutions.

Industry impact & future outlook

In 2026, expectations around health, wellbeing, and indoor air quality will continue to elevate cleaning from a visual task to a health-critical function.⁹

- Health-focused, low-exposure cleaning becomes a baseline requirement across sectors
- Greater scrutiny is placed on chemical choice, application methods, and air quality impacts¹⁰
- Cleaning teams gain recognition as contributors to wellbeing and trust in shared spaces
- Transparency around product performance and ingredients becomes essential to credibility

⁹Green Point Wellness: Creating Healthier, Cleaner Environments.

¹⁰How Green Cleaning Improves Indoor Air Quality.





TREND 5:

The rise of specialist cleaning solutions

A one-size-fits-all approach to hygiene is no longer effective. Cleaning methods are being adapted to different sectors, which have different risks, expectations, and operating environments. Amid concerns about health, safety, and risk management, the need for specialist knowledge and recognised qualifications is growing.

In hospitality, priorities include making cleanliness visible, sanitising high-touch surfaces, improving air quality, and controlling odour.¹¹ In healthcare, strict protocols necessitate using only disinfectants that can be proven to protect patients and sensitive equipment. In industrial environments, cleaning focuses on safety, contamination control, and processes that can endure heavy use.

Using the same method for all sectors raises the risk instead of lowering it. Digital tools and smart scheduling help adjust cleaning to each environment, allowing specialist teams to concentrate on critical areas and times.

This change is also increasing the need for formal qualifications, clear standards and trained professionals.

Challenges and opportunities

Specialisation adds complexity and requires targeted training.¹² However, it also reduces risk, improves outcomes, and makes it easier to demonstrate compliance and value. The right roles and training reduce risks, improve results, and help demonstrate compliance and value to clients. In addition, training and specialisation facilitate career growth, attracting and retaining skilled workforce in a more competitive labour market.

Industry impact and future outlook

As cleaning becomes more closely linked to health, safety, and risk management, sector-specific expertise is increasingly essential.

- Specialist cleaning strengthens compliance and reduces operational risk
- Formal qualifications and accredited training become indicators of quality
- Sector expertise helps providers differentiate and justify value-based pricing
- Manufacturers increasingly develop solutions tailored to specific environments

¹¹Essential Guide for Housekeeping in Hotels and Holiday Parks.

¹²Rise of Specialist Qualifications.





TREND 6:

Putting people at the centre: how workforce pressures reshape job design, safety, and retention

Labour shortages, high turnover, and the physical and chemical demands of cleaning are pushing companies to rethink how work is structured, supported, and valued, with an increased focus on supporting and empowering people. People-centric approaches are critical for vulnerable populations such as migrant workers, for whom cleaning remains one of the main entry points to the labour market. Working hours, integration, and fair treatment are closely linked to service quality as well as to wider social outcomes.



Operational practices

Leading employers are redesigning roles to make them more sustainable for people. Some employers also use quieter periods for paid training and language learning, developing people's skills without reducing working hours.

For example, in hospitality, “worry-free housekeeping” models give staff more time to clean rooms, pair new hires with experienced colleagues, and standardise checklists to reduce pressure and increase clarity for staff.

Working patterns are also under review. Daytime cleaning is gaining attention for both practical and human reasons. It reduces isolation, supports integration, and lowers risks linked to night work, including harassment and unsafe commuting. These people-focused changes are tied to procurement decisions; lowest-price contracting can drive excessive workloads and undermine standards, meaning firms need to carefully consider trade-offs and human costs.

Health protection is another focus. Growing evidence on exposure to cleaning chemicals, sprays, and aerosols is prompting employers to strengthen risk assessments, improve training, review ventilation practices, and reconsider product selection. Attention is shifting towards safer application methods, clearer instructions, and tools that reduce airborne exposure and repetitive strain.

Product and service innovation

Innovations include:

- Adopting automated and smart machines to handle repetitive tasks, freeing people to focus on supervision, quality, and detail
- Using digital scheduling and sensor-led planning to reduce wasted effort and improve predictability
- Developing clear career pathways and nationally recognised training to support workforce progression
- Multi-language learning opportunities and professional accreditation to elevate perceptions of cleaning work
- Promoting specialist, supervisory, and quality roles by employers and industry bodies, supporting recruitment and retention

¹³EFCI News: Automation vs. Upskilling.

Challenges and opportunities

Contracts and management remain a major source of pressure. Tight budgets and short-term contracts often increase workloads and limit time for training, placing strain on frontline teams.

At the same time, organisations are recognising that better job design delivers clear benefits.

“Rather than eliminating jobs, automation is transforming them, rendering cleaning roles more attractive to tech-savvy professionals. The next generation seeks positions that involve technology, problem-solving, and continuous learning, moving away from monotonous, repetitive tasks,”

argues Paul Ashton, CEO of Birkin Group and chairman of the Cleaning & Support Services Association (CSSA).¹⁴

Clear routines, safer working methods, and realistic staffing levels reduce absence and turnover while improving service quality. Open collaboration between clients and service providers also makes it easier to plan work properly and address issues early.

Improving working conditions is not just a cost consideration. It stabilises the workforce, raises standards, and makes cleaning a role people want to stay in.



Industry impact and future outlook

As workforce pressures intensify, job design, health protection, and skills development are becoming central to service quality and retention.

- People-centred job design improves retention, safety, and service consistency
- Automation and digital tools reshape roles rather than eliminating jobs
- Clients increasingly influence outcomes through procurement and contract design
- Cleaning is judged not only on results, but on how responsibly work is organised

¹⁴Attracting the Next Generation of Cleaning Industry Professionals.





TREND 7:

Tackling social inequality in cleaning and hygiene

Social inequality is a core problem for the cleaning sector. Heavily dependent on manual labour and with a majority-female workforce, the industry grapples with gender equality, fair pay, and job quality. Regulators, clients, and workers care about how organisations treat their people.

Such attention is visible in several EU policy priorities for 2026, such as the Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, and the coming Quality Jobs Act.¹⁵ For the cleaning industry as for other sectors, economic performance and social progress are in deep dialogue.

¹⁵2026 Policy Priorities – Turning Point for Europe's Cleaning Sector.

Operational practices

Improvement begins with fair and transparent employment practices. Organisations that implement diversity, equity, and inclusion programs can better attract and retain talent, can make better decisions, and reflect of the communities they serve. Workplaces that are inclusive, where people have a voice and are supported, have greater stamina, flexibility, and resilience.

Pay is still the main problem. In the UK and all over Europe, cleaning and building services have high rates of employees paid less than the Living Wage, whose rates are independently calculated to mirror local costs of living, typically exceeding the minimum wage requirement. Under such policy frameworks as the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and the changing ESG reporting requirements, companies must assess and resolve wage disparities not only within their operations but also in their supply chains in order to meet the expectations of their stakeholders.

Forward-looking organisations monitor representation, promotion, and pay equity while connecting social goals to management performance. The support of senior leadership and the direction given by the Quality Jobs Act are crucial in moving from identifying problems to implementing solutions.



Challenges and opportunities

The challenge is that responsibilities are fragmented. Low wages and limited career progression have resulted from short-term procurement models and complex but longstanding supply chains. In contrast to lowest-cost contracting, the public procurement reforms anticipated in 2026 signal a move towards quality, fair labour standards, and long-term value-based models.

Growing recognition of social inequality in the cleaning sector has triggered more deliberate efforts to improve conditions, particularly for the most vulnerable workers.¹⁶ Women and migrant workers remain over-represented in low-paid, insecure roles, making social protection and fair pay central to current policy debates. MEP Özlem Alev Demirel has argued, “the fate of the 4 million cleaners across Europe, many of whom women and migrants facing exploitation and exclusion, is a reason enough to make day cleaning and cleaners’ working conditions a top priority at the local, national, and EU levels.”¹⁷

Cleaning companies have an excellent chance to set themselves apart from competitors by proving social value, workforce stability, and adherence to forthcoming policy expectations.

Industry impact and future outlook

Growing regulatory and societal focus on fairness and inclusion will continue to redefine professionalism, quality, and value in the cleaning industry in 2026.

- Addressing inequality improves retention, recruitment, and service stability
- Fair pay, inclusion, and job quality become central to procurement decisions
- Social responsibility becomes a performance metric alongside cost and quality
- Organisations that act early on Living Wages and transparency gain trust and compliance advantages

¹⁶Living Wage – Cutting Social Inequality.

¹⁷“No Longer Invisible”: Building a European Alliance for Daytime Cleaning.



TREND 8:

Training and skills development move to the centre of operations

New technologies and sustainability requirements are raising skill expectations across the cleaning industry. As equipment becomes smarter and processes more standardised, higher standards for quality and safety mean staff need regular, structured training rather than relying solely on experience.

Robots, smart equipment, and advanced systems rely on people to use them correctly. Despite technological progress, people remain central to cleaning operations.

Frontline teams must now use advanced equipment and data to make informed decisions, moving beyond routine tasks. As compliance, quality, and safety standards become more demanding, ongoing structured training is essential.

In 2026, robots and intelligent systems are moving into core operational roles, raising expectations for full proficiency. Organisations that invest in adaptable, well-trained teams gain a competitive edge by consistently meeting higher standards.

Product and service innovation

Innovations include:

- Increased use of digital, flexible, and standardised training methods
- Online platforms delivering consistent content through short modules, on-demand videos, and multiple language options
- Introduction of virtual reality to practise complex or hazardous tasks safely
- Digital tools enabling risk-free training for difficult activities
- Emphasis that digital tools enhance but do not replace hands-on experience

Challenges and opportunities

Keeping pace is the challenge. Teams must learn new skills while managing new equipment and systems, often under time pressure. Effective, structured training reduces reliance on trial and error and equips staff with specific skills that make it easier to work with new tools and adapt to changing practices.

As Andy Cawdron, Operations Director at OCS, notes from experience in large-scale distribution environments,

“you can’t just put a robot into a warehouse and expect it to work.”

Successful adoption depends on people understanding how new systems fit into daily operations.

Industry impact and future outlook

Rising technology use and sustainability demands will make training and upskilling a defining factor for quality and resilience.

- Structured, ongoing training becomes an operational necessity rather than an add-on
- Digitally skilled teams deliver more consistent quality and safer outcomes
- Training and upskilling strengthen retention and career progression
- Early investment in workforce capability creates a lasting competitive advantage





TREND 9:

Hybrid cleaning adapts operations to flexible workplace use

Hybrid working has changed how offices are used, but cleaning schedules have often failed to adapt. Occupancy now varies significantly by day and location, while traditional routines still assume consistent use.

This disconnect wastes resources as cleaners may be assigned to empty areas, while high-use spaces receive insufficient attention. Facilities managers are seeking more responsive approaches.

Hybrid cleaning addresses this gap through digital tools and flexible deployment. Sensors and smart systems identify busy areas, allowing teams to clean based on real demand, reducing unnecessary work while maintaining standards in high-use areas.

Daytime presence is increasingly important. Cleaning teams remain visible and responsive, reinforcing hygiene and helping employees feel confident using shared spaces.

Challenges and opportunities

Coordination is the challenge. Hybrid cleaning requires close collaboration between facilities managers, cleaning teams, and technology providers. Poor communication can make even simple daytime cleaning disruptive.

When implemented effectively, the benefits are significant. Cleaning aligned with actual usage saves time, reduces costs, and minimises waste while improving service quality.

Industry impact and future outlook

Hybrid cleaning strengthens flexibility and resilience by aligning people, data, and processes with how workplaces are actually used. As demand patterns shift, cleaning moves from fixed schedules to responsive service delivery.

- Staff are deployed where they are most needed, improving efficiency and service continuity
- Facilities managers gain clearer oversight and stronger operational control
- Demand increases for solutions that connect occupancy data directly to cleaning plans
- Integrated tools that deliver clear, actionable insights create the greatest value
- Organisations that align people, data, and processes lead the transition to data-led services



TREND 10:

Redefining the value of clean to protect people

For many years, cleaning was considered a background activity. While important, it received little recognition. The primary focus was controlling cost and meeting basic requirements. Outside of healthcare and food production, standards were often seen as routine.¹⁸

This perspective is shifting as cleaning is now recognised as essential for health, safety, and accident prevention. Offices, schools, transport hubs, retail spaces, and industrial sites are increasingly evaluated on how effectively they protect occupants. As cleaning expands to include safety, comfort, and functionality, it has become a central operational function.

The value of cleaning is also being redefined through new partnerships.¹⁹ Long-term, collaborative relationships between clients and providers now shape standards, drive innovation, and align service delivery with broader business and social goals. These partnerships are transforming the industry.

The challenge is managing increased visibility and rising expectations. Hybrid work, public awareness, and environmental concerns have made cleaning more prominent and closely linked to reputation. People now expect consistent, reliable cleaning in shared spaces. Employers recognise its importance in building trust and supporting productivity. Standards once limited to specialist environments are becoming the norm across all settings.



Product and service innovation

Innovation in this area focuses on how cleaning is defined, measured, and delivered, rather than on individual products alone

Developments include:

- **Outcome-based service models** that measure performance through health, safety, and user confidence indicators rather than task completion alone
- **Digital verification and reporting tools** that provide visibility on cleaning frequency, coverage, and compliance
- **Integrated cleaning and facilities management platforms** that align staffing, schedules, products, and training with building use
- **Partnership-driven innovation**, where clients and providers jointly design standards, KPIs, and continuous improvement processes
- **Transparency tools**, such as dashboards and audits, that build trust by making cleaning performance visible and accountable

Industry impact and future outlook

In 2026, cleaning will be recognised less as a cost function and more as a strategic capability that protects people, supports operations, and builds trust.

- Buyers prioritise expertise, consistency, and evidence of health and safety outcomes
- Strategic partnerships replace transactional, price-led contracting models
- Cleaning roles require higher judgement, skills, and accountability
- Organisations that collaborate openly gain resilience, innovation, and long-term value

¹⁸The Importance of Cleaning in 2025.

¹⁹Partnerships – Changing the Face of Cleaning.



Closing perspective

Between robots and regulations, the people of the industry are feeling new pressures, but 2026 also brings a host of opportunities. Innovations within the industry are helping companies respond to clients' expectations, regulators' standards, workers' needs, and the pace of change. Harnessing and implementing these innovations requires people's careful judgment, growing skill, and ability to collaborate with each other and with new technologies.

Whether working with AI, making decisions about safety, or redefining what "clean" means for customers with higher expectations, people remain central. Across the industry, from frontline teams to senior leadership, the need for human skill, insight, and sound judgement continues to grow. Ultimately, the value of cleaning is defined by what it protects, people, business operations, and trust, and by how organisations collaborate to achieve these outcomes through effective partnerships.



