



# How to Break into the Event Planning Business

by Michael R. Fletcher

# About the Book

*How to Break Into the Event Planning Business* was originally published as an online publication through the *Dream Jobs to Go* project in 2001. No longer available through *Dream Jobs to Go*, the book has been reformatted and is now offered in this print on demand format.

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# Introduction

The annual sales meeting for your company ends with an elaborately themed safari party where guests are transported to an African plain, are served exotic drinks, and feast on "wild game." A local charity raises thousands of dollars for medical research at a casino night. The chairman of the board has a few hundred of her closest friends over for cocktails.

These events seem to magically materialize, and then magically fade away into the mist. You find yourself enchanted with the possibility of creating your own event. You want to know how to make the magic happen.

The magic behind each of these successful events comes from an Event Planner. Once considered a clerical duty, event planning has become a challenging and rewarding career option for many.

How to Break Into the Event Planning Business will help you determine if you have what it takes to become an Event Planner. Learn what to expect if you choose event planning as your career. Get an overview of the education and experience you need to be successful and learn about today's hottest event planning markets.

# What It's Like (Really) to Be an Event Planner

Gone are the days when the boss would yell into the intercom, "Mrs. Finch, the stockholders will be meeting here this afternoon. Please make sure we have enough Scotch and ice - and pick up some peanuts."

These days, Ms. Finch is more likely to receive an email from the boss saying, "We need to prepare for the stockholders meeting. Please make arrangements for lunch for 1,200 people. Also, the board of directors will have to be teleconferenced in from their retreat in Lisbon, and we will need to prepare to webcast the chairman's address with simultaneous translations into French, Spanish, Japanese and the Pakistani dialect *Memani*."

The world of business and the world of event planning have changed dramatically in the past 30 years. Technology and advances in travel have made face-to-face meetings more convenient while, at the same time, making them less necessary. And today's savvy event planner needs to know when to make the right choices regarding the types and frequency of meetings. While event planning used to be considered a clerical activity, it is now a high-pressure, highly technical, and increasingly competitive profession.

Event planners are everywhere. Chances are you crossed paths with one this week and didn't realize it. Whether you attended your best friend's wedding or whether you participated in or watched the Summer Olympics, an event planner was involved. Sure, planning a wedding and planning the Olympics take different kinds of people - for which reason we are grateful that our athletes don't march in bridesmaids' dresses - but the basic mechanics are quite similar.

Although similarities do exist, it's just not that simple. Our focus here is on becoming a professional event or meeting planner.

After all, event planning isn't only about the bridesmaids' dresses or the opening music at an Olympic ceremony. While planning parties and traveling can be part of an event planner's work, event planning is a demanding profession requiring extensive skills, hard work, organization, and a sincere desire to make events happen.

*As an event planner, you need to have a unique ability to look at the larger picture and determine the smaller pieces that have to fit together to make the larger picture complete.*

The chairman of the board won't be there days in advance to tell you how to set up the chairs and tables in the room and where the screen should be for her Power Point presentation. But she will be there to tell you if you get it wrong.

As an event planner, you need to have a unique ability to look at the larger picture and determine the smaller pieces that have to fit together to make the larger picture complete. Not unlike working a jigsaw puzzle in reverse order.

Event planners can go by many different names. Common among those names are conference and meeting planner, conference planner, convention coordinator, festival organizer, meeting planner, special events organizer, and trade show planner. Each organization or business may call the position with similar responsibilities by a different title.

As an event planner, you don't have to be an expert in every area pertaining to your meeting, but you must possess enough knowledge and expertise to be able to plan and converse intelligently.

It's not enough to say to the chef that you want to serve "surf and turf." You need to think about your attendees, your budget, dietary constraints, accompanying wines - and whether or not your attendees drink wine - appropriate desserts, centerpieces and more. Sure you can tell your caterer to "just make it happen." But if you don't know what you're purchasing, you'll pay - definitely financially and perhaps in quality as well.

So you need to be versatile and have sense of humor.

When I worked for a national association in Washington, D.C., I joked about having different times and different hats for working on various sections of my meetings. If I were to wear a chef's hat, I was planning menus. A party hat, I was looking for entertainment. But if I was wearing a fireman's helmet I was trying to "put out a fire" - fix a major crisis. My staff knew to watch out for the policeman's hat, because someone had made an error and I was about to call him or her on it.

That's a humorous way of looking at it, but you really do need to be that versatile. It's not enough that you have an accountant checking your books. That accountant won't be the one to tell how much you should spend on the program brochure and how much you should spend on cocktail franks. But he will tell you when you go over budget.

## How many event planners will be needed this year - or long term?

Successful Meetings magazine's State of the Industry Report notes that spending for meetings totaled \$122.1 billion in the year 2000. According to a Meetings and Conventions magazine report, 51 million people attended 853,700 corporate meetings in 1999 with meeting expenditures totaling \$10.2 billion. Similarly, 15.6 million people attended 174,200 association meetings with expenditures of \$13.7 billion in the same year.

However the recent economic downturn cut back on the number and scope of meetings, Meetings Professional International projects that the number of meetings will increase in the coming years. [FutureWatch 2011, [www.mpiweb.org](http://www.mpiweb.org)]

So, employment possibilities in the meetings and events market are largely dependent upon the strength of the economy. When times are tight, meetings and events are often the first items seen as non-essentials. But that's where the creative planner can prove his or her usefulness. Take a look at budget constraints and offer a plan for reduced meeting expenses, either through teleconferencing or simply a change of venue.

# Any current hot locations for event planners?

When considering industries for event planning jobs, take a look at health care, technology, and biochemistry. These developing industries offer an opportunity to get in on the ground floor.

Obviously for those industries you would need to look in the areas where they are expanding, such as Research Triangle Park in North Carolina or Silicon Valley in California. Always make sure the business growth climate is right for you to pursue a career in any area.

For the association market, greater Washington, D.C. and Chicago offer the most opportunities. From ice cream makers to undertakers, there's an association for about every profession.

# Meet a Few Event Planners

## **Amy Bell**

Amy has her own online Theme Party and Planning website that offers complete party packages and supplies. She works from home as an independent party planner. Amy says her website "is truly a one-stop party shop!" Once customers select a party theme, they have the option to contact Amy for helpful hints and ideas, plus she will provide referrals for other resources that would enhance the party theme they have chosen.

Here's my conversation with Amy -

*What is your typical day like?*

Because my business allows me to work from home and take care of my two small children, no two days are ever the same. I guess that's why I really like being in the event/party business. The flexibility of running my own business allows me to work as much or as little as I choose. There are days where I am lucky if I can get on the Internet or get on the phone to market my product and services. However, most of the time I am able to market my business to vendors, businesses, existing customers and other individuals who are interested in planning an event or party.

The ways in which I make contact with potential customers vary: First and foremost, I have a website that is my strongest marketing tool. I also have 130-page catalogs along with seasonal supplements that I distribute to interested persons. Then I contact persons or organizations that are currently planning parties and I send out direct mail pieces. I choose the one that will allow me to make the best impact while also considering my advertising budget.

*What do you like about being an event planner?*

I love the creativity of making each event or celebration truly unique, fun and memorable. The event itself can only last for a certain period of time - but the memories from that event last a lifetime. That is what I focus on ... what will be remembered, what will stand out, what will make this party or event unique and special for the theme or person it is intended.

I also like doing the research from books, magazines, Internet, pictures, word of mouth, and combining all the ideas that would work into one spectacular event!

*What do you not like about being an event planner?*

The part of my job that can become quite frustrating is when my timeline of planning the event falls apart. I am the type of person who likes to do things within a certain order (when reasonable), which allows me to stay organized and efficient. But the event planning business can be frantic and plans frequently change, often at the last minute. I am able to adapt to the new ideas and plans. Sometimes these new plans make a better party possible. But when you have to deal with other vendors, changes can become very costly.

*How did you become an event planner?*

I worked in corporate America where a large portion of my job was to plan events, trade shows, appearances, and parties. So when I became pregnant and know that I wanted to stay at home with my baby, I began looking for ways I could best use my experience in event planning. What I found for me was perfect. My focus is my children - they come first. However, I run a website 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I do a lot of my work when my kids are napping, at a friend's house, or with Dad. I am able to find a way where I can feel energized, creative, and empowered by focusing on a business I love that allows me the flexibility to work when I choose.

*Why do you continue to be an event planner?*

I love what I do. I love the creative process, the research, the exchange of ideas, the vendor relationships, and of course, seeing my envisioned dream become a reality.

*What would you do differently if starting over as an event planner?*

Nothing ... I like learning the ropes in corporate America - while they were footing the bills! Plus, larger companies throw larger-scale parties. Corporate parties have a tendency to be more complex, more vital to the consumer, products, or employee morale. Smaller events can be more personal, more flexible, and more forgiving when things don't go as planned. Now that I am on my own, I am more familiar with what seems to work and what does not.

*Any advice for someone wanting to become an event planner?*

Makes ure you love the event planning business. This ensures that the time and effort you put into planning events will be rewarding, gratifying, and pleasurable. Remember the old saying, "Do something you love and find a way to get paid for it."

*What are you favorite event planning books?*

- *An Invitation to the White House* by Hillary Clinton ... for formal affairs
- *In the Royal Manner* by Paul Burrell ...for formal and casual affairs
- *Creating Special Events* by Linda Surbeck...for event planning and ideas

*What are your favorite event planning periodicals?*

Any type of magazine that focuses on children, entertaining or crafts. I love to take bits and pieces of waht I see to customize the look. I am always looking for different ideas that can be modified to match the selected theme party or event.

I also like to go to bookstores, craft stores and other websites to get ideas and get my creative juices flowing. The key to my success is to take an idea and look at it in a variety of ways to conjure up a new idea that will enhance the upcoming event.

## **Emily Mathews**

Emily has seven and one-half years's experience in meeting, conference, and seminar planning, in both the corporate and nonprofit sectors. Her experience runs the gamut, from booking the facility to paying the final bill and everything in between. Emily says, "The extreme attention to detail required for this type of work is right up my alley."

*What is your typical day like?*

Right now I have a part-time job where I spend half the day. The rest of my day is spent job searching on the Internet, making contacts, and attending meeting planning related networking events. Even my part-time gig is sort of planning related: I am working at a place that holds computer-training classes.

*What do you like about about being an Event Planner?*

So much! The attention to detail required. Seeing my hard work come to fruition at a successful event. I will never forget doing a conference in Orlando and getting 30 people from the hotel to Disney for dinner and fireworks, and - here is the amazing part - getting them all back in one piece! Other likes: working with hotels and other vendors. Some of these friendships last and last. How busy it keeps me ... the hours fly by! Speaking of flying, I will not lie: I love the frequent flyer miles. I rarely take vacations, but I was able to upgrade to 1st class on future business trips, and I love staying in hotels. Who would not love it? You don't have to cook or clean. Plus, sometimes I have a really sweet hotel sales manager who upgrades me. At the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, I once had a suite so big I never went into most of the rooms! I felt guilty for taking up the suite.

*What do you not like about being an Event Planner?*

The general thanklessness. Although when I do get thanks, it is gratifying. Also what I think is relatively low pay, industry wide . . . at least for the women.

*How did you become an Event Planner?*

Like so many people, I fell into it and then fell in love with it. My first job out of college was with a statewide association, and I got to help with the conventions. Then I moved on to a huge corporation and planned some conferences for their satellite TV division. But in both these jobs, planning wasn't my only duty - just part. It was not until my third job, which I just left, that planning (seminars in this case) was all I did . . . and loved it.

*Why do you continue to be an Event Planner?*

It suits me so well. And I have built up a history, a resume. Why stop now? Despite technology, groups still meet in person.

*What would you do differently if starting over as an Event Planner?*

Maybe get an internship or something in college, or right out of college. But back then, I did not know I'd love it or want to do it!

*Any advice for someone wanting to become an Event Planner?*

Get over the perceived glamour factor. Most of the time it is not very glamorous. But when it is, it is. Check your ego at the door. And wear comfortable shoes onsite. That last piece of advice I never take! I feel more authoritative in heels.

*What are your favorite event planning periodicals?*

**Meetings & Conventions**

meetings-conventions.com

**Convene**

pcma.org/Convene.htm

What is your favorite event planning website?

**Meeting Professionals International**

mpiweb.org

**Patti Hughes**

Patti was in the hotel industry for 20 years, the last ten years as Director of Catering & Conventions. Her specialty and love was in Convention Services where she dealt with sleeping rooms, food/beverage, the front desk, and being right in the middle of the whole event. She left the hotel business to work for a company that did 45 meetings across the United States doing continued education for the medical field for about a year. Then she went back into the hotel field because it paid more. She stayed in the hotel business for another three years until she decided to go back into the meeting planner area and still be able to do what she loved from the other side of the fence.

Here's my conversation with Patti -

*What is your typical day like?*

A typical day in my position is meeting deadlines with four to five projects going on at one time. I am making plans for the next meeting and starting the planning process as early as possible for our two annual meetings. I also take care of the registration for each meeting. It can be crazy. You have a lot of deadlines at the same time, so you have to keep yourself organized and make great notes. I also do all the travel arrangements for our associations. Keeping track of everyone's requests sometimes get difficult as well.

*What do you like about being an Event Planner?*

I love when everything comes together and all your months of hard working and planning pay off. I think the most rewarding part of my job is when the attendees come up and tell me it was a great meeting. That's when I know I did it correctly. I also still get to be involved in everything.

*What do you not like about being an Event Planner?*

Unfortunately, when you work for a small organization it is only you - and that sometimes gets hairy, until it all comes together.

*How did you become an Event Planner?*

I knew I wanted to be a meeting planner. But I also knew if I got my experience in the hotel business that would be a plus. I read as many books as I could possibly read. Took meeting planner classes through the local university. I got the experience in a small company and took that knowledge back with me. Then I set my goals to go back in the meeting planning business and find the right job. It took me almost a year to find my current position. An excellent company to work for is sometimes hard to find.

*Why do you continue to be an Event Planner?*

I cannot see myself doing anything else. I found my calling and I enjoy what I do. It is challenging and rewarding at the same time.

*What would you do differently if starting over as an Event Planner?*

I would network with other meeting planners for their insights to this job. Ask a lot of questions about the position, such as what are the rewards and benefits of being a meeting planner? Also ask a lot of questions about the downfalls of being a meeting planner. People look at meeting planning as a glamour job and it is not. People do not realize it is a hard job. I would find a company with which to do an internship.

*And advice for someone wanting to become an Event Planner?*

Do a lot of research into the position to see if it is really what you want. Another great way is to become a Convention Services Manager or a Hotel Sales Manager. This will give you some insight of what a meeting and event planner does. Take as many classes as you can find. Read as many articles as you can find. Talk to other meeting planners.

*What are your favorite event planning books?*

*Professional Meeting Management*, edited by Edward G. Polivka and published by the Professional Convention Management Association.

*The Convention Industry Council Manual and Glossary*, available through the Convention Industry Council.

*What are your favorite event planning periodicals?*

**Successful Meetings Magazine**

successfulmeetings.com

I read all the periodicals that come to my office, even if it takes me two months. There is a lot of great information out there.

# Background and Training

Most event planners today do not have a degree in planning, but most do have at least an undergraduate degree and in many cases a graduate degree. Many began their careers as administrative assistants or secretaries who assisted in event planning and gradually assumed additional responsibilities. But that is changing and the competition is becoming more and more fierce.

The event planning occupation has become increasingly more professional over the past several years. Event planning is no longer automatically assigned to the division secretary or the most junior staff member. Management in business and associations around the world has realized that meetings are an important part of successful business.

Throughout the industry there are widespread certification programs - one of the most notable being the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) designation presented by the Convention Industry Council.

Persons interested in joining the event planning field often begin by learning the business on a small scale, sometimes as part of their job duties in companies where they are already employed. Some may also work for self-employed event planners or as assistants to planners in associations. Others enter through the hotel or restaurant industry, with experience in working conventions or large meetings in a variety of areas.

But more and more, younger planners are entering the field with their plans mapped out to start small and quickly advance to producing the largest and most sophisticated events possible. To that end, several institutions of higher education now offer event and meeting planning education.

## **Harrah Hotel College at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

<http://hotel.unlv.edu>

Harrah Hotel College at UNLV offers programs hospitality, tourism, and leisure sciences.

## **Virginia Tech Hospitality & Tourism Management**

<http://www.htm.pamplin.vt.edu/>

Students in the Virginia Tech program become prepared for management positions in the hospitality industry.

## **Johnson & Wales University**

<http://www.jwu.edu>

Johnson & Wales offers custom degree programs such as cruise management, casino and gaming operations, golf management and entrepreneurship. They also offer a specialized hospitality MBA program and online bachelor's degrees.

Be sure to check out the colleges and universities in your area for their program offerings. And don't overlook community colleges.

The most widely recognized and sought after certification in the event planning industry is the CMP or Certified Meeting Professional designation. Established in 1985 by the Convention Liaison Council, now the Convention Industry Council, the CMP credential was developed to recognize and raise industry standards, practices, and ethics while maximizing the value of services provided by CMPs. To qualify for the Certified Meeting Professional exam, planners must have worked full time for at least three years with a wide variety of event and meeting planning experience.

While certification is not required, thousands of planners now hold the CMP designation and the market is increasingly competitive. Don't expect to earn your bachelor's degree one week and walk away with your CMP the next. You'll have to put some time in as a professional event planner first. But there are resources to help you along the way.

Several associations offer CMP study groups to help you prepare for the exam. And, if you're resourceful, you can find some help in paying for the cost of the exam.

The Professional Convention Management Association also offers scholarships for those pursuing careers in the meeting industry. In addition to a CMP scholarship, which pays the exam fee, PCMA also offers grants to cover the costs of textbooks, membership in the organization, travel, and admission costs to PCMA events.

You can get into the event planning business without formal education and training. But you'll find that your competition will seem brighter and better prepared for the job because they did pursue the training.

Ironically, most of the seasoned planners today, this author included, sort of fell into the event planning business. For me there was a job to be done and I needed steady employment. I made my decision to become an event planner while standing behind a registration desk watching my boss. I knew I could do a better job. Within two years I was doing a better job - and it happened to be hers.

But you can't plan to go into this business and hope for that scenario to work for you. That was over 25 years ago and I certainly met my challenges along the way.

# Best Ways to Break In

Consider how these ideas for breaking into the business apply to your personal situation.

If you're just coming out of high school or you're planning to return to college and you really want to plan events, then check out the educational resources available to you.

If you're already employed, ask your boss or company meetings department how you can help. Don't blow it by neglecting your primary duties, but see how you can fit in. Any meetings department will always have something else to be done.

When group projects come up, make sure you volunteer to help. Establish yourself as a team player.

Any opportunity to plan is valuable experience. Is someone leaving the company? Offer to plan the send off. Volunteer to plan the agency picnic. These may seem like small tasks, but that's the point. Event planning is all about the small tasks and making them all fit together.

If you seriously want to be a successful event planner, you need to realize from the beginning that no job is beneath you. If you can delegate, that's great. But don't expect as a beginning planner to have a staff at your disposal. You need to be willing to do anything and everything required to make sure your event is a success.

I once stayed up half the night working with a fine-point pen to change, on hundreds of copies, an "r" to an "n" in a program. Sure, it seems trivial, but the sponsor whose name was misspelled wrote a sizable check to our organization on an annual basis.

## Resources

### **American Society of Association Executives**

[asaecenter.org](http://asaecenter.org)

### **Convention Industry Council**

[conventionindustry.org](http://conventionindustry.org)

### **International Special Events Society**

[ises.com](http://ises.com)

### **The Meeting Candidate's Network**

[meetingjobs.com](http://meetingjobs.com)

# Tips from the Pros

Many people have turned event planning into a most successful business. Some of the more notable planners offer their resources and expertise to help new and experienced planners improve their skills and advance in the industry.

## from Dawn Penfold

Dawn Penfold established The Meeting Candidates Network to offer recruiting specific to the meetings and hospitality industries as well as a highly customized database, which now profiles more than 7,500 active candidates at all position levels.

Dawn has been in the hospitality industry for over twelve years. New York Mayor Ed Koch appointed her Director of Tourism for the Brooklyn Bridge Centennial Celebration in 1983. She has also been a planner at The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, Deloitte and Touche, ITT World Headquarters and was a partner with Lerner International, Inc. She has a master's degree in tourism and travel administration and earned her CMP in 1993.

- Getting a job in the meetings industry can be difficult, but there are numerous ways to break into the industry. The two main sources are networking and the classified ads (both in the newspaper and online). Networking is important through organizations such as MPI (Meeting Professionals International), PCMA (Professional Convention Management Association) and other industry associations.

**Meeting Candidate Network Inc. & The Incentive Network**  
meetingjobs.com

A complete listing of all the industry associations and their websites is under the resource section of this website.

- Classified ads can be found in any local paper and are usually listed under numerous job titles. Read the classifieds carefully; many positions have meetings or special events in their descriptions but not in their title. Some job titles to start with: Administrative Assistant, Associate, Association, Conference, Coordinator, Education, Incentive, Medical, Meeting Planner, Public Relations, Special Events, Assistant, College Grad, Director, Roadshow, Grand Rounds, Fund Raising, Marketing, Exhibit, Pharmaceutical, Publishing, Travel, Corporate Travel, and Production.

You can also find classified ads online. [www.meetingjobs.com](http://www.meetingjobs.com) is the most comprehensive website offering job opportunities in the industry. The "big" boards such as Monster often have jobs listed, but you may have difficulty finding them. Use the keywords to search for jobs relating to the meetings industry.

- Education is also an important factor in learning more about the industry. It may not necessarily land you the job of your dream, but it will give you the nuts and bolts of the industry, knowledge of the buzzwords, and an opportunity to learn and network with many industry experts. Many colleges, universities, and adult education schools offer programs in meeting management. You may also get valuable education through the professional associations listed above.
- The meetings industry by and large believes in playing your dues and learning through the job. If you are in college, try to get an internship relating to the industry. Many professional associations and major corporations offer these. If you cannot get an internship, get involved at your school in planning events and meetings. If you are in a "career change," be prepared to take a few steps back to move forward in your new chosen career. Many skills are transferable, but hiring officials are looking for strong skills in hotel and vendor negotiations, site knowledge, computer proficiency, and food and beverage planning knowledge as well as other general job skills.
- The location of the hottest markets is dependent on the present economy, but you can usually find meeting planner positions in any major tier city with a high proliferation of corporate headquarters and associations. Hot industries are: Financial (brokerage firms or banks), Medical/Pharmaceuticals (includes medical education companies as well as pharmaceutical firms), Technical (even though they are going through a rough phase, the computer industry will continue to grow and plan meetings), Third Party/Production (the economy is forcing many companies to outsource their meetings and events to other companies that specialize in meetings and events). Permatemp (only for the experienced person who wishes to temp permanently), and Associations - meetings and events are a revenue stream for most associations, therefore, they usually have strong meetings and events departments.

## from Corbin Ball

Corbin Ball is president of Corbin Ball Associates, is an international speaker, consultant and writer, and has twice been named one of "The 25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry." Corbin has over 20 years of experience running international technology meetings, is the technology columnist for five publications, and serves on numerous hotel, corporate and association boards.

Ball keeps a comprehensive and up-to-date list of industry-related websites. he has published a book reviewing meeting software products, and offers dozens of articles on meetings technology and free Excel meeting planning software tools at his site.

- **Website**

corbinball.com

If you're trying to break into the industry, you may find meeting planning software an essential tool in helping you cover all the bases. Ball's tips on meeting-planning software:

- In my work as a meeting software consultant, I would start by asking the client a number of questions:
  1. What are your goals and objectives in looking at new software?
  2. What meeting tasks would you like to see automated (badge making, registration, online registration, mail merges, meeting specifications, surveys, database management of clients/members, email/fax automation, statistics, room diagramming, budgeting, exhibition management, housing, project management, scheduling, site selection)?
  3. What over-the-counter software are you currently using (Access, Excel, WordPerfect, Word)?
  4. Can these products be customized to provide the solution, rather than purchasing specific meeting planning software?
  5. What works well and what doesn't?
  6. What computer platform are you using?
  7. Does your company have a database network or corporate intranet? If so, will you need to integrate your meetings into it?
  8. How helpful is your IS department in understanding your needs and integrating solutions? (This is an area where a consultant often can help in the process - as oftentimes, IS departments use techno-speak rather than English.)
  9. Do you intend on using Web-based solutions to help in this process? (The answer should almost always be yes.)

10. Do you wish to integrate the meeting management with the travel management to improve convenience and service to the client or member?
11. What is your budget?
12. What is your timeframe for implementation?

Once these questions are answered, you can begin to narrow the choice down to specific software products.

## from Phyl. Monroe

Phyl. Monroe has been in the travel and hospitality industry for 21 years. She specialized in Groups and Meeting Services for 10 years before pursuing her career as an event planner. She freelances as a meeting planner, onsite specialist, and in-office procedural consultant as well as runs her business, eSPECIALLY for MEETINGS - Planners on the GO!

- Stay organized.
- Find a system that works for you - and use it every time. I use Excel worksheets for every meeting - Tab 1 is the File cover page (who, what, when, where), Tab 2 is the hotel contact page, Tab 3 is the diagram, Tab 4 is the rooming list, Tab 5 is for notes (date, who I spoke with), Tab 6 and beyond are checklists for that particular meeting (pre-meeting, on-site, post meeting). I have a generic workbook that I "save as" using a code (07.23.02 BOS HH Smith).
- Always keep your eyes and ears open - you never know when the person you talked to yesterday is the savior for your meeting today.
- Network - join Meeting Professionals International and like organizations - and get involved in your local chapter. I sit on the board of the Ohio Chapter and that involvement has helped me beyond belief. Go to every event you're invited to, especially for the first five years.
- Never be afraid - A) to ask for help - especially on the Internet, where help is at your fingertips; use it. We've all be there and we love to share! - BE) to admit a mistake - the sooner you admit it, the sooner it gets fixed or the lighter the consequences - C) to suggest something new or a different way to do something. Your fresh eyes might offer the solution to a challenge the organization new saw. The worst they'll say is "but we've always done it this way."
- Successful meeting planning is all in the details - the ones nobody remembers until they go wrong.

# Special Considerations

It's easy to think of event planning as a way to have fun planning parties and spending lots of other people's money. And there are some of those benefits that come along with it.

You may end up in a glamorous, albeit highly stressful job that allows you to travel the world, visit exotic places, stay in five-star resorts, and live the finest life. But keep in mind that the Lower Footscratch Association of Bug Sprayers may also need an event planner. And they may be the only ones to offer you the job.

If you want to see the world, join the Navy. If you want to make things happen, become an event planner.

Along that same line, before you embark upon this adventure, make sure your standard of ethics is firmly established - because you will be challenged.

Hotels, convention bureaus, airlines, printers, caterers all want your business. And many are willing to offer some incentives to get you to check them out. These incentives can range from a simple box of chocolates, to a fine dinner and theater tickets, to airline tickets and a weekend at their respective destination. Individually, these can be innocent and useful. But guard yourself against becoming a starry-eyed planner searching for each and every opportunity to be catered to. Ultimately, you want to make sure you can clearly assess whether a property or location is best for your event based on the facts, and not based on the free weekend at the beach.

Still, perks may come your way and they may indeed be necessary and beneficial to what you're doing. While I worked in Washington, D.C., I managed an annual conference budget in excess of \$2 million. That was a lot of buying power and I was a much sought after planner.

Because our annual conference usually involved my being onsite for around three weeks, my wife and son would travel with me to the summer meeting. But one day that all changed and Dad was no longer in the same glamorous job, but found himself working for the government. That year, Dad paid for the vacation. When we walked into our standard hotel room with two double beds, my five-year-old son exclaimed, "We can't stay here, there's no living room."

Get used to it. The living room is nice. But if that's the only reason you want to plan events, you need to reconsider.

# Your Game Plan

1. Set some goals. If you really want to pursue a career in event planning, you need to assess where you are and where you want to be. Map it out from there. Don't expect the boss to suddenly come to you and say, "Will you plan our meeting for 5,000 people?" It just ain't gonna happen.
2. Talk to people in the business. Join the MIMlist (Meetings Industry Mall). Contact some CMPs. Talk to hotel representatives in your area. Find out how these people got there why they are and factor that into your game plan.
3. Get organized. And this is a must. If you can't find your own grocery list, how can your employer trust you to plan meals for hundreds of people?
4. Network. This is a must. You need to know how to network and to keep in touch with different types of people and resources. Keep business cards and notes for the people you meet. Anyone you speak with is a possible connection to your next job.
5. Read as much as you can. Subscribe to industry publications, which are often free to those involved in event planning. Pay close attention to the cover articles that profile the stories of successful planners. These publications offer up-to-date information regarding industry trends and opportunities.
6. If you plan to stay in your specific industry, make it a regular habit to read your own industry-related publications. You don't have to become an industry expert. But if your company sells Spacely Sprockets and the competitor sells Cogswell's Cogs you had better know the difference.
7. Stay on top of current events. Pay attention to business trends and the latest technology. Know how changes in the market and the economy will affect your business.
8. Volunteer. At work ask your boss how you can help. Join industry and community associations and offer to plan the next fund-raising event - just be sure you're up to the task before you take it on.
9. Understand how your company works, including the source of revenue and major expenses. Get a firm grasp on the company finances. And in doing so, make sure you can develop and follow a budget.
10. Join associations for meeting planners. Consider the American Society of Association Executives, Meeting Professionals International, the Professional Convention Management Association, others. Many of these groups have local or state chapters. Get involved (see networking). Sometimes your employer will cover the membership costs; if not, your expenses may be tax-deductible.

10. Get an education. Often, if you're a member of an association, you'll get a reduced rate for courses offered. But don't limit yourself to association courses. Check out the offerings at your local college or university.
11. Find a mentor. This is related to our point about talking to established planners. But take that a step further and get to know someone in the business. Ask him or her to walk you through planning an event and to give you an overview of how they got where they are.
12. If you're looking to punch a clock, leave early for the beach on Fridays, and be home in time to watch your favorite show, then perhaps event planning is not for you. Plan to work long hours. Plan to travel.
13. Develop a love for event planning and for building a successful event from the smallest idea.



## About the Author

Michael R. Fletcher is a freelance writer, blogger and editor living in Richmond, Virginia. A former Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), Michael spent eight years living in Washington, D.C., where he directed the conferences for a major association. His work there included developing conferences from the ground up, planning the agenda, and marketing the event to more than 2,300 attendees.

Working with the White House, Michael coordinated and promoted special events with Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush and with the Clinton Administration. He worked with foreign ambassadors and members of the European Parliament.

Michael is a graduate of Asbury University, where his son is now majoring in Media Communications and where Michael served as Alumni Association President. Michael also studied at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Michael lives in Chesterfield with his wife, two sons, and an aging Black Labrador.

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