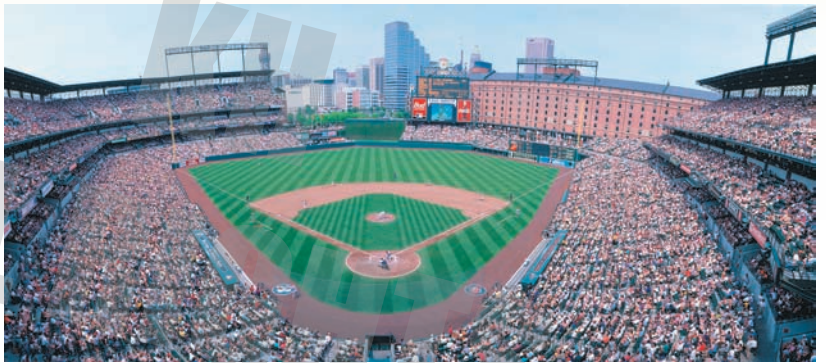


Chapter 5

SKILLS OF THE EVENT PLANNER: YOUR ROAD MAP TO SUCCESS

Event planners must both understand and utilize a host of skills in order to become effective and successful within the field. This chapter considers some of those skills that are imperative for an event planning career. While communication is central in event planning, the skills listed in this chapter will help you understand the multifaceted discipline. Event

planners must regularly and competently practice these skills—all vital in communication—to develop the muscle memory that will help incorporate them into part of the planning regimen. In addition, besides strong communication skills, there are a host of other abilities that event planners must develop, such as ingenuity, flexibility, and thoughtfulness (Camenson, 2002). Professional event planners can use their knowledge and experience to take the worry out of an event, and thus need strong communication skills to convey to the client that they can create and develop an event that will fulfill the client's vision (Greenwell, Danzey-Bussell, & Shonk, 2013). While one or two other professions might occasionally demand clairvoyancy and superhuman skills, event planners must constantly be attuned to what *might* occur and know immediately how to address unforeseen challenges.



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When you have finished reading this chapter, you will be able to

- identify the particular skills that event planners should include as part of their expertise;
- suggest practical ways to manage time and balance commitments;
- express a client's vision clearly in terms of business and design.

Planning an Anniversary Celebration

Kristen Schultz, Director, Community Relations and Promotions, Baltimore Orioles

Type A personalities are defined as ambitious, well-organized, and concerned with time management. They are often high-achieving, multi-tasking workaholics who are driven by deadlines. In contrast, Type B personalities are defined as creative and visionary risk takers. Event directors must carefully balance each of these conflicting personality traits to produce successful events.

As the Director of Special Events for the Baltimore Orioles, I produced a commemorative event recognizing the Orioles 60th Anniversary in 2014. In doing so, I had to resist my conservative Type A personality traits of practicality and common sense in favor of creative vision. I used this vision to produce a magical ceremony that was filled with huge risk but high reward.

Event professionals are often faced with obstacles that go beyond their control. In this case, my challenge was to produce an outdoor post-game event that captivated 40,000 fans while facing the risk of thunderstorms, extra innings, or a devastating loss. The event demanded a first-class showcase, honoring the largest number of Orioles Hall of Famers ever assembled at Oriole Park. The event also needed to surpass previous celebrations and become a unique historical milestone in its own right.

My vision was to create a Disney-like event that combined themed music and special effects with historic game footage and live player introductions. To bring vision to reality, I collaborated with our internal events staff and an outside special effects company to capture 60 years of Orioles baseball within a 30-minute show. We started with a storyboard and a timeline, two essential elements that kept the project on task. The storyboard helped to communicate my vision onto paper while the timeline kept us organized and on schedule. The storyboard outlined the conceptual elements of the show. The three-month timeline detailed when we would send pictures, logos, audio, and video to the production company. It also provided approval deadlines and a final completion date for the project. During production, the event team coordinated player travel, provided hospitality, and promoted the event. One week prior to the event, I scheduled a dress rehearsal to identify unforeseen issues and allow for last-minute changes.

On game day, the risk paid off with clear weather, a sold-out crowd, and a decisive Orioles victory. The atmosphere was electric, setting the stage for an iconic celebration. The event was flawless, as 23 members of the Orioles Hall of Fame appeared from the shadows of the dugout into the spotlight at home plate as lasers and fireworks illuminated the sky. Music and video prompted fans to cheer, cry, and applaud throughout the show. The celebration garnered rave reviews from players, media, and Orioles ownership.

Planning and executing this event left me with a profound understanding of how to utilize my predominant Type A personality traits in harmony

with my less instinctive Type B traits to produce a balanced outcome. High risk produced high reward but demanded clear communication, effective time management, creative vision, and an eye for design, all skills necessary to produce an event of this magnitude.

Contributed by Kristen Schultz. Copyright © Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

After reading this chapter, revisit the case study and respond to the following question:

Do some research on Type A and Type B personalities. Based upon your type, what challenges would you face in planning a large-scale public event?

Skills for Successful Event Planning

A wide variety of skills are necessary for success in the field of event planning. This chapter focuses on several characteristics of event planners: responsibility and self-control; availability; flexibility; organization; time management and multi-tasking skills; detail orientation; business savvy; an eye for design; vision and intuition; and passion. Much of the literature reiterates some of the specific abilities this chapter covers, but sometimes these lists of skills are focused on the management aspect of event planning, while other inventories are more attuned to client interaction (Camenson, 2012; Getz, 2012; Silvers & Goldblatt 2012; Van der Wagen, 2010). Any event demands strong communication and social abilities, including



Diagram 04. *Skills of the Event Planner*



interpersonal and presentation skills, as well as the ability to remain calm in chaos (Camenson, 2012; Silvers & Goldblatt, 2012). A solid organizational sense seems to be a commonality as well, which can include administrative, strategic, human resource management, budget planning, risk analysis, and marketing abilities (Getz, 2012; Van der Wagen, 2010). In addition, event planners generally need a strong technical or technological side (Silvers & Goldblatt, 2012), and lastly, there are several personality characteristics that

are prominent in the literature, including flexibility, optimism, creativity, leadership, accountability and passion (Epler, 2014; Getz, 2012; Smart & Featheringham, 2006).

In each instance, the explanatory approach concentrates on why these particular characteristics are essential, how they are connected to communication, and where and when they can be utilized. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it covers many of the optimal attributes of event planners. Think of all the skills needed to plan an event such as New York's Fashion Week. This event brings together fashion lovers from all over the world as designers exhibit their latest creations on elaborate runways underneath the tents at Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library. Sponsors line the inside of the tents, giving away items that guests can place in a branded goodie bag. For the past several years, Mercedes-Benz has been the primary sponsor of New York's Fashion Week, but other sponsors, from Lipton Tea to Macy's to Subway, have participated as well. This elaborate event takes place over two weeks in both February and September when the fall and spring lines are showcased. Tickets are distributed to lists of celebrities, fashion writers, buyers, and industry specialists all over the world. Photographers set up at the end of the catwalk in tiers ready to snap a photo as models pause and pose as they walk the runway. This large-scale city event captures the attention of the world for many days as celebrities sitting in the front row grab headlines in the Style section of the newspaper and in magazines online. The planning and preparation for this event is multi-layered and creative. Designers plan their fashion shows, but a planning team orchestrates the overall implementation of Fashion Week, a team that must be responsible for scheduling and coordinating the shows that happen inside the tents as well as in various locations throughout the city.

Responsibility and Self-Control

Responsibility: *The ability to perform a duty that is demanded of someone; reliability*

Self-control: *Restraint regarding one's own actions in order to achieve a goal*

For the event planner, **responsibility** means authenticity of design, consistency of delivery, and commitment to excellence for the client. These qualities demand **self-control**, or restraint regarding one's own actions in order to achieve a goal, from the event planner in every experience. Emotional events occur in the field of planning and management, but the very best event planners depend upon their self-control to help them restrain from indulging in negative actions when something goes awry (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005). In a society where a public brand depends

on its image, most people want to associate with a brand that stands for integrity and responsibility (Doyle, 2012). The current trend is to connect corporate responsibility to social change (Jakobson, 2013), but individual responsibility can also be demonstrated in a variety of ways. Since more and more levels of management are encouraging employees to exercise self-discipline in what they are charged to do, rather than relying on top-down controls (Hamel, 2009), developing this responsibility early in a career will ready the event planner for any worst-case scenario.

If the event planner does not have effective coping skills and cannot maintain self-control when a cool head is called for, it is likely that **goal-directed behavior**, a way of acting that is motivated by the desire to achieve an outcome, will be disrupted (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). As a result, performance levels decline, and the event may not be as successful as was planned. Emotions that arise as a response to a negative event keep the event planner from focusing on the goal and instead indulge in too much self-analysis (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005). Often, such self-analysis will mean that the event planner “gets stuck” at a certain juncture and cannot move forward towards the goal. Those who can stay focused on reaching the goal without letting the emotions of the moment influence their performance will not be affected as overwhelmingly by any emotional occurrence (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005). For example, an event planner who has to arrange a charity event for a sick child cannot get caught up in the sadness of the situation but needs to focus instead on the celebration of life. This task is easier said than done, but your emotions cannot trump the creation of a successful event.

A good practice for the event planner is to develop a **problem-focused approach** to ideas of self-control and responsibility. This approach is a rational way of responding to a challenge that involves taking control, seeking information, and evaluating choices. Bandura (1997) notes that those who are action-oriented and task-focused tend to be able to avoid getting stuck and wallowing in self-doubt. Emotion-focused drama queens who love heightened levels of negative excitement are not generally cut out for a career in event planning, for the ability to manage negative occurrences at events will necessarily affect long-term performance (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005). Event planners must develop a level of self-monitoring coping tactics that will help improve their individual performance. If event planners learn how to assess a situation calmly and realistically, and then stabilize it by reducing any possible negative outcomes, the level of emotion will subside and all parties can move on. Venting or storming out only serves to aggravate the negative outcomes (Brown, Westbrook, & Challagalla, 2005) and demonstrate a lack of self-discipline that should not be a part of any event planner’s brand. Having self-control, knowing when to say yes and no, being responsible for your clients, and having their best interest at heart are all attributes of the self-disciplined event planner.

Goal-directed behavior: *A way of acting that is motivated by the desire to achieve an outcome*



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Problem-focused approach: *A rational way of responding to a challenge that involves taking control, seeking information, and evaluating choices*



TIP

The event planning profession is not a 9–5 job.

— Kristen Schultz

Availability: Accessibility for service or help

Availability

Knowing how to handle details and be a problem solver means being available through the duration of the event creation, affair, and debriefing. Clients and vendors alike depend on the event planner to provide service, advice, organization, decision-making, eloquence, and negotiation whenever these qualities are needed; thus, the need for immediate availability becomes crucial. You can manage this skill by developing a fine balance between your own **availability** to clients and over-commitment to the point of burnout. Juggling both the creative and the business aspects of any corporate work means understanding time management and developing a willingness to cut back on personal time during periods of high activity. Clients may believe that they can contact you any time of the day, but it is your job to let them know clearly and directly what your professional boundaries are. Conflict arises when demands from the workplace impinge upon non-work life in ways that cause frustration and imbalance (Sturges & Guest, 2004). For example, a demanding bride might feel that it is appropriate to call, text, or email her planner at 10 p.m. because that is the only time the bride is available. Frantic messages might help ease the client's nerves, but continuous communication at 10 p.m. might cross the lines of acceptable employee/client boundaries.

Event planners should examine certain facets of their personal and professional life that impact their availability and prevent them from being able to balance their time. This process could involve several steps. Kahle (2004) writes about the unpredictable kaleidoscope of the life of a sales person, much like that of an event planner. Unforeseen events are the norm, and while they may offer an adrenaline rush for the moment, they sap time and energy and eat into a schedule that has no extra time in it. Because many event planners prefer the personal aspect of their work (as opposed to the financial side), they may simply prefer to go “off the grid” for a more enjoyable two hours shopping with a client rather than spending that time with the finances or budget work at the office. Sticking to the plan may afford a less hectic workday, offering a bit of free time at day's end. Tracking your daily/weekly time expenditures through careful logging (Allen, 2005) will ensure there are no time bandits in your professional life. Face-to-face meetings, for instance, may be less profitable than Skyping or telephone conversations, but are there other advantages a personal meeting offers? Building and keeping a strong relationship with clients often means making clear your availability from the start. Being an advocate for both the client and yourself helps you better negotiate your working schedules.



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Flexibility

Many times in the field of event planning, scheduling an event down to the very minute will give you a sense of how the event is going to run. Staying on task is a desirable attribute of a great event planner, but being flexible is also crucial. Planning and **flexibility** might seem to be extreme opposites, but that is not always the case. In the event planning industry, something will always go differently than planned, and you need to be flexible enough to adapt to the situation at hand (Peters, 2007). An adaptable event planner will know how to make an event a success when the caterer is stuck in traffic and the delay completely throws the schedule off.

Ermenegildo Zegna (2014), the CEO of a luxury menswear brand, believes that for individuals to succeed in any business, “flexibility is key” (p. 10). Individuals never know what events can occur to cause a major disruption to a well-planned schedule. Without a schedule, chaos is bound to occur, but more commotion will exist when an individual refuses to be flexible and meet the needs of that particular moment. In his book *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*, Daniel H. Pink (2009) states, “Flexibility simply widens the fences and occasionally opens the gates” (p. 90). When event planners are flexible, the options for creating new ideas can become endless. Take, for example, the caterer who was running late due to traffic. Instead of panicking, a great event planner might have a discussion with the client who agrees to leave the bar open an hour longer for an impromptu meet and greet until the caterer is ready. Being flexible will allow you to adjust a schedule to make an event work. Moreover, flexibility will create a space that is fluid and can ebb and flow instead of becoming rigid and stagnant.

Flexibility is a skill that can be used in various aspects of the event planning job. In examining organizations, John Atkinson (1984) creates three types of flexibility that make an organization productive: (1) **numerical flexibility**—finding the number of people needed to complete a task; (2) **functional flexibility**—being able to perform and move among a range of jobs; (3) **financial flexibility**—understanding how to move and shift numbers depending on the budget. Sparrow and Marchington (1998) then added four more types of flexibility to create seven overall categories: (4) **temporal flexibility**—examining the time patterns of when things get done at work; (5) **geographical flexibility**—comprehending the increased mobility of working groups; (6) **organizational flexibility**—allowing for changes in the structure and system of how the company operates; (7) **cognitive flexibility**—creating a mindset of continual change. By understanding these categories, you will be able to create flexibility in all facets of your job. As an event planner, you need to understand how flexibility will not only benefit your overall success in the industry, but also how it can lead to greater success for the event planning company. Clients will like working with planners who are flexible.

Flexibility: *Willingness to yield in a certain circumstance; adaptability*



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Numerical flexibility: *The ability to find the number of people needed to complete a task*

Functional flexibility: *The ability to perform and move among a range of jobs*

Financial flexibility: *The ability to move and shift numbers depending on the budget*

Temporal flexibility: *The ability to analyze the time patterns of when things get done at work*

Geographical flexibility: *The ability to understand the increased mobility of working groups*

Organizational flexibility: *The ability to allow for changes in the structure and system of how a company operates*

Cognitive flexibility: *The ability to create a mindset of continual change*

Organization

Organization: *A systematized approach to a task that focuses on process*

The difference between working efficiently and inefficiently lies in your ability to develop strong organizational skills (Worth, 2004). **Organization** is a skill that requires you to classify things into various categories (Issa, 2009). White (1978) states, “The beginning of all understanding is classification” (p. 22). By breaking down the components of an event, you are able to understand what needs to get done and when it needs to get done. If you are lacking organizational skills, your life and many of the events you plan will feel very chaotic. Worth (2004) believes when you have organizational skills, you will have “more control of your life, a greater sense of accomplishment, and a higher level of success” (p. 4). Learning to be an organized person is a process that has many different characteristics (Goldberg, 2005). As an event planner, some guidelines to keep you organized are as follows:

TIP

Create an archive of event details to assist in the planning of future events. Include everything from checklists, schedules, contact databases, to photos and samples of event promotional materials. Taking a moment to create a record of event details may save countless hours of researching and second-guessing in the future.

—Candice Thomas-Maddox

1. Create a great filing system—label all of your documents in a way that helps you remember the best vendors, for instance. There is no need to recreate an event. Keep your favorites on file with detailed notes as a point of referral should you ever have to execute that event—or a similar event—again. An organized and functional filing system will also help you remove clutter from your desk.
2. Invest in paper and electronic planners—both paper and electronic planners keep you on task. Looking at a calendar is a helpful reminder of what needs to be completed by an exact date.
3. Develop to-do lists—these types of lists keep you on task. If you write a to-do list every day, you are less likely to miss important deadlines. Checking off what you have accomplished will also keep you on point as you move through the project. Keeping daily, weekly, and long-term lists is helpful.
4. Prioritize and do not procrastinate—all event planners need to know what must be handled immediately and what details you can save for later. Great venues fill up quickly, and the best caterers are usually booked a year in advance. If something does not need to be tackled right away, save it for a day when you are less busy. Do not procrastinate and wait until the day of the event because you need time to plan for the unexpected.

5. Write everything down—you might think you can remember the details of every client’s wish list, but that is not always the case. Carry a pen and small notebook with you at all times. Keep detailed notes as a reference so that you can always go back to them and find answers.
6. Track notes, contacts, and vendors in spreadsheets—these records will help you build a comprehensive database of information. This list is a continual work in progress and will make your job easier as it continues to grow.



Events run more smoothly when both you and your event are organized. As Edmund Burke (1790/2008) wrote, “Good order is the foundation of all good things” (p. 248). If you are able to stay organized, you will be able to keep yourself and your event on track.

Time Management and Multi-Tasking Skills

In today’s society of constant communication, it is easy to say there is not enough time in the day, but effective time managers are able to prioritize their schedule so that time is on their side. **Time management** is defined as “behaviors that aim at achieving an effective use of time while performing goal-directed activities” (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2007, p. 262). The literature on time management discusses skilled time managers as being able to set and prioritize goals, monitor goal progress, and manage productivity (Britton & Tesser, 1991; Jex & Elacqua, 1999; Orpen, 1994; Peeters & Rutte, 2005). Skilled time managers are more selective in prioritizing their time and are more likely to focus on high-priority tasks (Hall & Hursch, 1982). They consider the time required for each activity and systematically account for the time it will take to achieve a designated outcome (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2004; Tripoli, 1998). Effective time managers are less likely to overcommit, resulting in a better sense of the time needed to complete tasks (Burt & Kemp, 1994). With effective time management skills, event planners are able to multitask.

Multitasking has become an integral skill in today’s society and occurs when you work on several tasks simultaneously (Shao & Shao, 2012). Individuals multitask to accomplish numerous demands of the various roles event planners play (Kaufman, Lane, & Lindquist, 1991). Imagine working as an event planner on two separate events that occur during the same weekend. As you try to manage two different venues, it is essential to keep the details of each event separate but simultaneously complete all the particulars of the events before the big day arrives. Multitasking allows event planners, for instance, to prepare for a 50th anniversary party on a Friday night and an engagement party on Saturday morning. The details for each event should remain separate, but an effective multitasker might meet with a favorite florist and receive a discount for a double booking that uses the same centerpieces for both parties. A busy event planner must develop strong time management and multi-tasking skills in order to succeed in the business.

Detail-Oriented Skills

There’s a fine line between being **detail-oriented** and letting yourself get mired in endless trivia (Benton, 2000). Event planners need to be able to see the big picture while they also must have an eye for the particulars; this means a constant shifting of focus and an alertness for what may be different from the scripted plan. Peters (2007) states, “Planners must think of,

Time management: *The ability to create behaviors that achieve an effective use of time while performing goal-directed activities*

Multitasking: *The act of performing several tasks simultaneously*

Detail-oriented: *The ability to see the big picture and also have an eye for the particulars*

TIP

Good planning and forethought are at the core of the best events. I don’t like process, but when it comes to event planning and execution I know that the devil is in the details.

— Sandy Hillman



and keep track of, an amazing number of details” (p. 7). Paying attention to details can also be a time-saver, since it eliminates repetition, carries out the plan, and helps to prevent mistakes. However, many who are detail-oriented are also perfectionists, and may have to train themselves not to let these perfectionist tendencies prevent them from moving on to the next task (Basco, 2000). Training yourself to use your proclivity for details to your advantage will be instrumental in the life of an event planner. For example, imagine that you have created a program for a convention in which you have left out a name of a prominent sponsor. Reprinting 1,200 programs is not an option because of the cost. You must consider alternatives, such as creating an embossed gold sticker that could be affixed to the front of every program and which highlights the sponsor. While this may be labor intensive and require additional cost, it demonstrates your ability to prioritize details. However, if you have slightly misspelled the name of a breakout session room on one page, would you endure the cost and the labor time to fix it?

Developing an event fact sheet that you can distribute to others helps the planner keep all the event details aligned and focused (Diggs-Brown, 2011). Knowing that you must convey the details of the event to others will force you into a regular review of the occasion’s elements. This insistence on attention to details often becomes the hallmark of the successful event planner (Wendroff, 2004). Being detail-oriented means more than just making hundreds of decisions during the planning stages; it means knowing what those details are without having to check and recheck the plan and your progress.

Critical path: *The sequence of stages that indicate the minimum time needed for an event’s duration*

Critical Path Method: *A plan in which all the connected jobs of a project are laid out in paths according to the order they must be performed, with a time listed for completion*

Event planners often call this detailed plan the **critical path**, which had its origins in project management in the 1950s (Tracy, 2002; Wong, 1964). The **critical path method**, or CPM, helps to determine the progress of a project at any interval. Each assignment in a project has a space on a path, generally using a bar chart, according to the order in which the tasks must be completed. The project manager, in conjunction with all the project’s players, determines the time required for each job, and the chart clearly demonstrates all the interrelationships of the pieces of the project. The manager records every change in deadline and each person’s responsibility. The longest path, known as the critical path, shows the project duration (Wong, 1964). While the Critical Path Method is extremely useful for its ability to display the plan and thus afford collaboration and agreement among those working on the project, often its parts, including terms, definitions, methods, and functions, are not standardized within the industries that use it. Project managers define processes and use the critical path differently, so a lack of consensus in the use of the Critical Path Method has created a wide variety of exemplars and many variations (Galloway, 2006). The method remains, however, a very useful tool in the event planner’s toolbox, especially when connected to a long-term plan or assignments for the day of an event.



Business Savvy

Event planners must have a strong sense of the industry and be business savvy in order to be successful. According to Brown (1983), “**Business savvy** is the ability to comprehend the social and economical systems and realities that affect one’s success in the marketplace: it is being able to harness these forces to facilitate achievement of goals and use them to stimulate further growth and achievement in oneself and others” (p. 53). As event planners create and manage events, they must understand all facets of business, including budgeting, sales, negotiation, marketing, advertising, and promotions, among others; additionally, they should be able to work well with people.

Successful, savvy businesspeople aim to build win-win situations, whether it is with their customers, clients, employees, business alliances, or vendors (Stephenson & Thurman, 2007). Building relationships will help foster the business side of event planning and will make the execution of the event run that much more smoothly. In order to succeed in the industry, event planners should implement responsible business practices. Browne (2006) states, “Our commitment to responsibility has to be expressed not in words, but in the actions of the business, day-in and day-out, in every piece of activity, and every aspect of behavior” (p. 55). Clients rely on event planners for everything from determining costs to selecting a location for an event, so having a mind for business is an absolute necessity. For example, depending on local chambers of commerce for networking events can provide event planners with opportunities both to meet other business professionals and rely on them for referrals. An article titled *Savvy advice is nice, but cash is even nicer* (2006) in *Adweek* reported findings of a poll in which owners of small businesses were asked to cite things that may have helped them during their start-up phase. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed stated that it would have been helpful to reach out to more business folks for advice; 39% said they wished they understood financial management better; 32% said they needed more legal and accounting assistance; and 32% said they needed to spend less on non-essential expenditures. Furthermore, participants recognized that it typically took more than three years for their businesses to begin to flourish. Becoming business savvy requires event planners to take time to learn all the different aspects of how their company will conduct business—and help it to thrive.

Understanding the business world and your company’s goals will help guide you as you grow and shape your business. Miller (2006) suggests that businesses typically have three common goals: (1) to increase revenues through differentiated products or services, (2) to decrease costs, usually via better execution, and (3) to provide better customer experience to improve loyalty (p. 17). Vass (2007) notes that savvy business people will understand that adding value to an existing product or improving on one already in existence can help guide your company’s

Business savvy: *The ability to comprehend the social and economical systems and realities that affect one’s success in the marketplace*

TIP

It’s lonely at the top: join a business peer group. There are a variety of start-up incubators, accelerators, CEO or Entrepreneurial peer groups that meet regularly. Find one that fits where you are and where you want to go.

— Paul Wolman



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success. Vass also advises looking into your products or services to see where there may be gaps that need solutions. Through a careful study of the event planning industry, you will be able to see if your offerings match those of your competitors, and if there is any room for you to expand.

Another way to become business savvy is to trust your most talented people (Allen, 2006). When you trust those with whom you work, they will not only live up to your expectations, but also to their own. “When you want people to produce at their peak levels, empowerment and communication are vital” (Allen, 2006, p. 48). The event planning field is one based on relationships—both building and sustaining them—and only the most adept professionals will understand the importance of the relational and business sides.

An Eye for Design

Design: *The ability to envision how an event could be staged and executed with exceptional creativity*

Design thinking: *An approach to innovation that is powerful, effective, and broadly accessible, that can be integrated into all aspects of business and society, and that individuals and teams can use to generate breakthrough ideas*

Mind map: *A trademarked system of representing ideas, with related concepts arranged around a core concept*

Event planners must constantly **design** events to make them interesting, intriguing, entertaining, or beautiful. Being able to envision how an event could be staged and executed means developing exceptional creativity and designing the event for maximum impact. But what is design? And how can design thinking help motivate an event planner? Tim Brown (2009) states that **design thinking** offers “an approach to innovation that is powerful, effective, and broadly accessible, that can be integrated into all aspects of business and society, and that individuals and teams can use to generate breakthrough ideas that are implemented and that therefore have an impact” (p. 3). Inspiration for design thinking can come from people, places, or things, and it asks you to trust your intuition and feelings, even though event planners tend to rely primarily on their rational and analytical selves in the business world.

While Tim Brown discusses design thinking, the founder of IDEO, David Kelly (2006), suggests another strategy you can incorporate that might help you design aspects of an event. He uses a technique called mind mapping that begins with an initial idea and allows for visual brainstorming with both words and pictures. **Mind maps** depend upon free association, showing relationships among ideas. Imagine a tree with many branches emanating from it. The tree is the central idea, and the branches are supporting ideas and details. Mind maps can help anyone expand ideas and build upon them using association. Some great ideas might come from this exercise, but it requires you to allow yourself time to sit, create, and design. The net goal is to come up with ideas that work for the client and for the good of the event.

As you begin to plan events, the spaces in which the events will take place, for instance, will challenge you, and it will be your job to bring design thinking into the venue or location. Event planners must think in pictures—visually—to bring events to life. This can



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mean you have to visualize the decorations and flowers, the placement of the DJ, or the candlelit walkway. You will have to decide how to get the best flow in the room by placing the food stations strategically. Getz (2012) states that events do require aesthetic design, because it is the event planner's job not only to create atmosphere, but also to be a problem solver. Will the chairs work where you have placed them? Is the entrance to the event constricting or welcoming? At what time will the program begin? These are all questions that will need answers, but they must be answered in conjunction with each other and with your design in mind. All the elements must work together well so that they function as a whole rather than individually. As you design your event, keep in mind the creative and practical elements that will make it a success.

Vision and Intuition

An event planner's responsibility is to create **vision**, and the process begins with asking three questions: (1) what is the significant purpose of the business? (2) what is the picture of the business' future? and (3) what are the clear values upon which you base your decisions? (Blanchard, 2007). An event planner's job is to understand all three of these questions in order to properly discern how to execute each event. Planning daily for each event and those scheduled for the future is at the forefront of an event planner's tasks. Being able to see what the future may hold helps an event planner make educated decisions. Kramer (2002) discusses the former chairman and CEO of General Electric Jack Welch's lexicons. Jack Welch believed that it was important for leaders in business to create a vision and then to step aside. Event planners will have to trust those with whom they work—from vendors to colleagues—to do their jobs. This requires that the event planner communicate details of the event's overall vision so that there is clear understanding among all involved.

In their seminal work, Daft and Weick (1984) found that top leaders must interpret the environment in order to develop a comprehensive strategic vision; the vision must be shared by, reduce uncertainty for, and generate meaning for their stakeholders. Westley and Mintzberg (1989) believe that a strategic vision should be a priority for improved performance within the organization. Event planners should be able to clearly identify what their goals are and how they will achieve them, but they should also articulate goals to all who will work with them on events. Understanding then communicating a client's vision can help you guide others through all the steps necessary for the event to come to fruition.

Event planners also rely on **intuition**. The Oxford Dictionary defines intuition as "the ability to understand something immediately, without the

Vision: *The ability to see what the future may hold and plan accordingly*

TIP

Sometimes you need to fight your practicality to ensure your vision. Take risks.

— Kristen Schultz



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Intuition: *The ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning*

need for conscious reasoning”—to let you know if something is right or wrong and/or working or not working. Bacon (2013) states, “Intuition can reveal some aspects of your situation which your ability to reason cannot. In fact, your internal radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question. There are things your gut knows long before your intellect catches on” (p. 29). In event planning, there will be times when you will have to rely on your intuition to make decisions. In fact, Keen (1996) reported that 89% of marketing professionals used intuition to guide some part of their decision making.

Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004) recommend asking yourself some questions to see just how much intuition tends to guide your own decision-making. Can you trust your intuition in times of stress? Are you competent in being able to rely on your intuition when meeting new people? Are you comfortable relying on feelings rather than logic and reasoning in decision-making? Questions like these can help you form decisions when you must rely on your intuition. Understanding how your intuition works and what guides you can be helpful in discerning how you make decisions as an event planner. Intuition is a non-linear process that bolsters innovation and creates results (Glaser, 1995). Your instincts bring together many facets of knowledge and emotion. Williams (2012) links intuition to awareness, and believes that those with good intuition usually have a high degree of empathy; being able to master your own sense of truth or understanding can lead you to become a more intuitive manager. Knowing when to listen to your gut and when to adhere to rational thought is not always a black-and-white endeavor and should be rooted in your experience and practice. However, respecting your intuition and understanding it as a necessary skill for event planners may help you trust and hone it in order to serve clients in the best manner.

Passion

Passion: *A fervor or enthusiasm for an idea or plan*

To be an effective event planner, you must have a **passion** for the field. But how do you know if you do? Being excited about a career is wonderful; however, it is passion, a fervor or enthusiasm for an idea or a plan that will sustain you over time. Boverie and Kroth (2001, pp. 97–178) identified five keys to passion, and suggested ways to both find it and maintain it.

Key #1—The Discovering Process: This idea asks you to discover work that excites you. Sometimes people know what they want to do at a very young age; for others, the discovery comes later in life or through a process of soul-searching.

Key #2—The Designing Process: This is where you find a way to implement your passion. Once you learn what will make you happy, you design plans to make it work, whether it means taking additional classes, becoming an apprentice to someone, or deciding to be an entrepreneur.

Key #3—Risking: Most people who have taken the plunge into the world of making their passion a reality have taken some sort of risk, whether it is a financial risk, a personal risk, or an educational risk.

Key #4—Learning: Passionate people have a desire to grow. They are constantly learning, evolving, and investigating new ways to make things happen.

Key #5—Building Self-Efficacy: Albert Bandura (1982) created the term **self-efficacy**, which states that people have a belief about their own abilities to accomplish something. The concept relies heavily on ideas about what people believe they are capable and not capable of doing; for example, those who believe they have the skills and talent that merit a promotion may very likely receive a promotion. Those who desire to do so have the power to build their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy: *The idea that people believe in their own ability to accomplish something*

By understanding these five keys to passion, and applying them to your future as an event planner, you will develop a clear direction and impetus for this career.

There is no denying that being an event planner is a somewhat unconventional occupation. From dealing with design elements to being detail oriented, event planners must be multi-faceted professionals. Those in the field are required to work long days as well as nights and weekends, or whenever events are scheduled to occur. If you do not have a passion for the work, you may experience disillusionment with your career. Understanding the time commitment is going to be necessary for you to execute your role in the organization of events. Therefore, it is important to enter the field fully aware of the benefits and drawbacks. The benefits of the job and the happiness you can bring to others through your work should leave you feeling passionate about your chosen career path. Good event planners know how and when to make themselves available, juggling their personal and professional lives with expertise and organization. Event planners must also understand the many ways to interact in a diverse society, and to do so, they must develop business acumen and be able to use their skills effectively to create events with passion and vision.



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Key Terms

Responsibility

Self-control

Goal-directed behavior

Problem-focused approach

Availability

Flexibility

Numerical flexibility

Functional flexibility

Financial flexibility

Temporal flexibility

Geographic flexibility

Organizational flexibility

Cognitive flexibility

Organization

Time management

Multitasking

Detail-oriented

Critical path

Critical Path Method (CPM)

Business savvy

Design

Design thinking

Mind map

Vision

Intuition

Passion

Self-efficacy

Discussion Questions

- 1. Good intuition is needed in event planning. Name a time when you followed your gut, and your intuition did not lead you astray. Then name a time when your intuition betrayed you.
- 2. Are you an organized person? Did you have to learn to become more organized? Discuss your organizational behaviors and why organization is one of the keys to success in event planning.
- 3. Event planning requires a great deal of innovation. Discuss an event that you have attended where the event planner’s eye for design was omnipresent and helped create a unique atmosphere.

Activity

Using the Likert scale below, be honest and rank the strengths of each of your skills, with 5 being the highest possible score and 0 being the lowest. After you have scored yourself, write a summary in paragraph form indicating where you can improve and why you think there is room for improvement. Use this record as a guide and reminder when you are planning events so that you can focus on areas that need improvement. Sometimes event planners strengths are so great, they carry them through events, whereas their weaknesses can hold them back from success. Being conscious of where you need to improve will help you become an all-around better event planner.

Skill	Strong		Average		Weak	
Responsibility & Self-Control	5	4	3	2	1	
Availability	5	4	3	2	1	
Flexibility	5	4	3	2	1	
Organization	5	4	3	2	1	
Time Management and Multi-Tasking Skills	5	4	3	2	1	
Detail Oriented	5	4	3	2	1	
Business Savvy	5	4	3	2	1	
An Eye for Design	5	4	3	2	1	
Vision and Intuition	5	4	3	2	1	
Passion	5	4	3	2	1	

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