

Assignment Details and Rubric

Interviewer: **Scott from the University**

Welcome

Derek Abeyta is not only a course developer and part-time instructor for Kaplan, but he has 22 years of experience in the U.S. Air Force. He has two master's degrees: one in Operational Sciences and an MBA. One of his duties throughout the years for the military has been coordinating high-level meetings, conferences, etc. entailing sometimes very complicated logistics.

We interviewed him on Wednesday August 27th, 2008 for this course.

Part 1:

Interviewer: **Scott:** Hi Derek, great to have you with us today.

Derek:

Thank you, Scott!

Scott: We are very impressed with your background. Can you tell us how you got involved in meeting and conference planning?

Derek:

Well, I actually just kind of fell into it. It began when I was in high school. I was elected the class and student body president. Our first big event was homecoming, in which we had to select the "Westside Volunteer of the Year" recipient and homecoming queen, and organize the bonfire, homecoming parade, football game activities, and the after-homecoming dance. Having to coordinate with the fire department, police, hospital, ambulance service, parks and recreation department, other city officials, school administration officials, and negotiate entertainment for the dance and with the nightclub for package deals was quite a task. I was fortunate to have a super sponsor who provided great supervision as well as an outstanding supporting cast. I learned a lot of lessons that continue to help me to this day. It was a baptism by fire, but I fell in love with event planning. The satisfaction of seeing all your hard work pay-off is worth the headaches.

Scott: How many meetings and conferences have you had to coordinate over the years?

Derek:

Well, since joining the military 22 years ago, I would say I coordinated countless meetings and about 1–2 conferences or events a year. Not only have I worked meetings and events for the military, but also some events in the private sector. I've worked the Special Olympics, the Air Force Aid Society, the Combined Federal Campaign, base air shows, neighborhood association events, scouting events, reunions (high school and college), annual awards banquets, POW/MIA memorials, golf tournaments, bowling tournaments, anniversaries, and weddings.

Scott: Sounds like a lot of good experience. Can you tell our class, do you have a basic plan that you use or expand on for each of these meetings or conferences you've arranged?

Derek:

Early on, being a part-time public affairs officer, I learned, how not to re-invent the wheel. The public affairs office has checklists for many types of events. I would utilize these checklists and tailor them to fit my particular

need. I've always been a pretty organized person and I've carried that into event planning. As they say, people don't plan to fail, they fail to plan. So, I always take as much time up front to plan out the event that I need, beginning to end. Knowing that "life happens," it feels best to ensure I have a back-up or some type of contingency plan for those surprises that I know will occur. I do what I can to minimize the potential of surprises, but as they say, "Life is full of surprises."

I also look to see if there is a continuity book for annual events. With the nature of the military assignments, we tend to get reassigned every couple of years. It is always a good idea to see if a continuity book, if one exists, has any lessons learned. Each city and state has its own idiosyncrasies and it is best to know what one may face at the very beginning. Again, I try to reduce surprises as much as possible.

Along with a continuity book, I look for those who were on the team for the previous year. I like to talk to them and get their perspective of the previous year's event. This has been very beneficial in the past.

Scott: What part of the meeting is the most challenging or do you think would be the most challenging for civilian meeting planners?

Derek:

Great question. Well, there are many challenges but the one I see as the most challenging, for both the military and civilian planners, is the reduced lead time to plan an event. Many fail to understand or appreciate the complexities behind planning an event. Perhaps this is in part due to the "success" of event planners making the events run so smoothly. However, the quicker turnaround time to execute an event, the higher the risk that problems will occur.

There are numerous timelines out there to help event planners and many start 18 months out. Having 18 months to plan for an event is no longer a reality, at least for many in corporate America. It is not unheard of to only have 4 weeks to plan a major event. Just trying to find a location that is available 18 months out is challenge enough, but trying to find one within a 4-week period — that's a nightmare! A short lead time also lends itself to higher costs. The longer one waits to purchase an item, the more it is usually going to cost. This philosophy also holds true when contracting for entertainment, food, beverages, etc. As I've been told before by a hotel manager, "We can do anything you want as long as you have the money to make it happen." However, meeting budgets are not going up but down adding to the challenge.

Bottom line, when tasked to perform a "miracle," I let the boss know right away what is involved and if the miracle is even a possibility. However, they usually don't want the details just the results, again adding to the challenge.

Scott: Could you offer any advice to our class in terms of things they need to know, or important insider tips they need as they start exploring this field?

Derek:

One of the first lessons I ever learned was how important it is to build a "team" for the event. As the adage says, "You are only as strong as your weakest link." As the leader, you have to delegate and if you can't trust your team to get their particular jobs done right and on time, failure is almost certain. Along with that, it is important to get a strong right hand "person," or deputy, who can jump in for you. There have been times when I was handling an issue and if it wasn't for my deputy jumping in and moving things along, the event would have fallen apart. My deputy serves as my stand in.

In order to build a strong team, take the time to get to know each other. Even if it's getting together for lunch or dinner, take time to do some activities outside of planning for the event. This can be a challenge for short-lead

time events, but it will pay big dividends in the end. Also, plan up front for an after event party or activity to “reward” your team — decide as a team what that should be. This can serve as a motivator, especially if it’s something big.

As far as tips in exploring this career field, I would offer the following: I strongly believe the job you hold should be a job you enjoy. If you enjoy organizing home activities such as scouting, children’s holiday parties, family reunions, etc., this is definitely a career field to explore. If you can get paid doing what you enjoy, that’s a bonus! Take the time to get your degree and also become certified.

Scott: Sounds like a good idea Derek. Do you have any “tricks of the trade” so to speak regarding how you have handled some unexpected glitches or last minute changes when coordinating a meeting or conference?

Derek:

Yes, we know life happens. In the Air Force we have a motto that says, “Flexibility is the key to air power!” We have to be willing to adapt to the environment as it changes, and that starts with your plan. The more details the plan has, to include contingencies, the easier it will be to deviate from the plan when the unforeseen descends upon you.

One example of the details I get at the beginning deals with the points on contact list. I usually get more than just a work number or email. Everyone I speak to, I get their work phone, cell phone, work email, the names and work numbers of 2 others in their office who can help if they cannot be reached, and I also request their home phone and email. I sometimes get pushback on the home information but I provide my reasoning and then they usually concede. The main reason I ask for all the backup numbers is you never know when a problem could come up and not just during business hours. After all, everyone has a vested interest to ensure the event is successful. I also provide everyone with my contact information so I can be reached, to include my home contact information as well.

Also, as I make arrangements, I find out what my options are; my backups. For example, making arrangements for using a video teleconferencing room, I find out what other times are available during the timeframe of the event for a particular VTC room and also what other VTC rooms are available and their open times. I also try to determine if a mobile VTC cart is available, just in case. Bottom line, I try to plan for as many “just-in-case” scenarios or contingencies as possible.

Recently I had to plan a 2-day meeting between two organizations in which we had almost 100 participants. On the Friday evening before the Monday morning kickoff, the schedules of the participating general officers involved, changed. As a result, most of the day two activities were moved to day one. If it was not for my detailed phone list and my contingency plans, the meeting would have been a failure. However, I was able, along with my team, to “re-plan” the event and it turned out to be a huge success.

So, if you stay flexible, the chances of the unforeseen being able to tie you in knots are reduced.

Scott: Since you are constantly getting new information and constantly calling everyone etc., do you use a blackberry that you carry around with you all the time? What do you suggest for the Planner who is just starting out and maybe can’t afford one? How can they keep track of everything and at the same time be walking around with it all? How do you organize it so it’s portable?

Derek:

Yes, I am fortunate enough to have a blackberry. This gives me access to a phone and my email. I also carry my personal cell phone with me. Along with my blackberry, I carry “hard copies” of some important documents (POC list, schedule/timeline, contracts, etc.) and have at my fingertips. It also serves as a backup in case my blackberry loses service or if it “dies.”

This leads into what to do when one can't afford a blackberry, create an event binder. Divide it into different sections (POC list, schedule/timeline, contracts, etc.) and tab it. As far as communication, it would be wise to rent walkie-talkies for the event. Set up a table at the event for the walkie-talkies next to the manned phone bank and have all the battery chargers there for the team. Ensure you have plenty of batteries so the team can come by every couple of hours to get fully charged batteries. Also at the event, in order to keep your hands free and still have your binder available, get a backpack. It is easy to set your binder down and forget where you left it.

Scott: Good advice Derek. Thanks for your time. We sure appreciate you sharing your expertise with us today.