



Meeting and convention planners

by Sadie Blanchard

Meetings and conventions bring people together for a common purpose. But these events don't just happen. Someone has to coordinate every detail, from booking speakers and locations to arranging for printed materials and audiovisual equipment.

That someone is a meeting and convention planner. Meeting and convention planners work to ensure that people gathering for a shared objective can achieve it seamlessly, without having to think about the minutiae of the meeting. Some organizations have internal meeting planning staffs, and others hire independent planning firms to organize events. Planners work for nonprofit organizations, professional and other associations, hotels, corporations, and governments.

On the following pages, you'll learn what these directors of detail do. You'll also find out what meeting and convention planners earn, what their job outlook is, and how they prepare for, enter, and advance in the occupation. A final section points you toward additional resources.

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Making meetings happen

Communicating effectively and establishing and maintaining relationships are important skills for meeting and convention planners. For example, planners must be able to find out what an organization's goals are for a meeting or convention; they also must be able to convey their needs to meeting site staff and suppliers. And they must maintain contact with many different people and inform them of any changes that occur.

Meeting and convention planners' day-to-day duties involve preparing and coordinating an event and then analyzing its success. These duties may vary, depending on the needs of the organization for which planners work.

Event preparation

A planner's first step in arranging a meeting or convention is to determine the purpose, message, or impression that the sponsoring organization wants to communicate. Increasingly, planners focus on how meetings affect an organization's goals. Different room setups, for example, can encourage group interaction and convey a sense of professionalism.

Many planners choose program content, such as speakers or entertainment, that will achieve the organization's goals for convening. Before selecting content, however, planners might survey prospective attendees about their interests and use that information to arrange the meeting.

Meeting and convention planners search for prospective meeting sites, such as hotels, convention centers, and conference centers. They request proposals from all of the sites in which they are interested. These requests state the meeting dates and outline all the needs for the meeting or convention, including equipment, lodging, and other necessities.

Representatives of the prospective meeting sites respond with proposals that include descriptions of, and prices for, the space and services that they can supply. Meeting and convention planners review these proposals and either make recommendations to their supervisor or, for planners who have more autonomy, choose the site themselves.

Planners then negotiate contracts with representatives of chosen sites and with suppliers. These contracts, which have become more complex in recent years, are often

drawn up more than a year before the meeting or convention being scheduled. Contracts might include clauses requiring the planner to book a certain number of rooms for the meeting attendees and imposing penalties if rooms are not filled. Therefore, planners must be able to closely estimate how many people will attend the meeting. Planners make these estimates by examining information about an organization's previous meeting attendance and current circumstances.

Planners also must oversee the finances of meetings and conventions. The organization sponsoring the meeting provides an overall budget, and planners create a detailed budget that forecasts what every aspect of the event will cost.

After a site is selected and prices are negotiated, meeting and convention planners arrange support services, prepare site staff for the meeting, and set up all forms of electronic communication—such as e-mail, voice mail, and simultaneous online communication—needed for the meeting or convention. And they make sure that the meeting site adheres to fire regulations and labor laws.

Final preparation occurs on the day of an event. Planners verify that all supplies have been delivered to the meeting site on time, that meeting rooms are equipped with sufficient seating and audiovisual equipment, that exhibits and booths are set up properly, and that materials are printed.

Event coordination and followup

During meetings and conventions, planners are responsible for event logistics. They register attendees and issue name badges, coordinate lodging reservations, oversee food and beverage distribution, and arrange transportation.

At the conclusion of an event, planners measure how well a meeting's purpose was achieved. The most obvious way to gauge a meeting's success is to have attendees complete surveys about their experiences before leaving. Planners ask specific questions about what the attendees learned, how well organized the meeting seemed, and how attendees felt about the overall experience.

Planners also look at more objective measures. If the purpose of a meeting or convention was publicity, for example, a good measure of success would be how much press coverage the event received.

A precise measurement of a meeting's success, and

one that is gaining importance, is return on investment. Planners compare the costs and benefits of an event and show whether it was worthwhile to the organization. If a company holds a meeting to improve company morale, for example, the planner might track employee turnover before and after the meeting.

Varying duties

Some aspects of planners' work vary according to their clients' or employers' needs. Planners who work for associations, for example, promote their meetings to association members, convincing members that attending the meeting is worth their time and expense. But event promotion is usually unnecessary for corporate meeting planners because most employees are required to attend company meetings. Corporate planners also usually have less time in which to prepare their meetings.

Small organizations are less likely than large ones to have sizable planning staffs. As a result, meeting planners in small organizations perform a wider range of duties and usually enjoy more autonomy because one person

might coordinate an entire meeting.

In large organizations or in those that sponsor large meetings or conventions, meeting professionals often specialize in a particular aspect of planning. Specialties include conference coordinators, who handle most of the meeting logistics; registrars, who handle advance registration and payment, name badges, and the setup of onsite registration; and education planners, who coordinate meeting content, including speakers and topics.

Organizations that hold very large or complex meetings or conventions may employ planners in several senior positions, such as manager of registration, education seminar coordinator, and conference services director. These organizations might have a meeting planning department that is led by a full-time director.

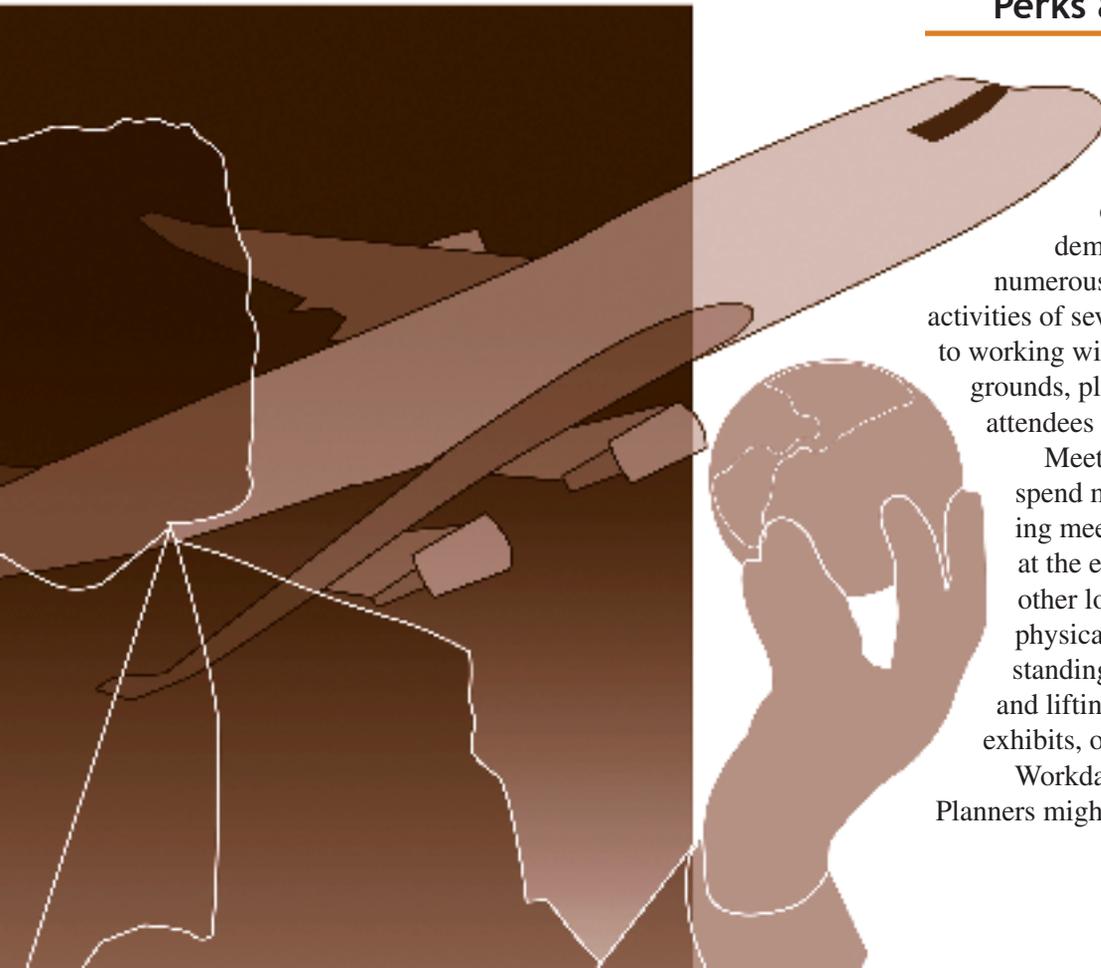
Planners who work for Federal, State, and local governments must operate within established government practices. For example, they must follow procedures and rules about buying materials and booking lodging for government employees.

Working conditions: Perks and pressures

The work of meeting and convention planners might be considered either stressful or energizing. But there is little question that it is fastpaced and demanding. Planners multitask, face numerous deadlines, and orchestrate the activities of several different groups. In addition to working with people from diverse backgrounds, planners may meet speakers and attendees from around the world.

Meeting and convention planners spend most of their time in offices. During meetings, however, they work onsite at the event hotel, convention center, or other location. Their work requires some physical activity, which often includes standing and walking for long periods and lifting and carrying boxes of materials, exhibits, or supplies.

Workdays can be long and irregular. Planners might log more than 40 hours per





week in the days or weeks leading up to a meeting and fewer hours after finishing one. During meetings or conventions, planners' workdays may be very long, possibly starting as early as 5 a.m. and lasting until midnight. Weekend work is sometimes required.

For many planners, an enjoyable tradeoff for their hard work is that their job often includes travel to beautiful hotels and interesting places. Planners travel regularly to attend meetings and to visit prospective meeting sites. The extent of travel depends on the type of organization for which the planner works. Planning for local and regional organizations requires mostly regional travel; planning for national and international organizations requires travel to faraway locales, including foreign countries.

Jobs and money

In May 2004, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), meeting and convention planners held 34,640 wage-and-salary jobs throughout the Nation. The largest employers were hotels and other traveler accommodation establishments, which employed about 20 percent of meeting and convention planners, and business, professional, and similar organizations, which employed about 15 percent. Few planners were self-employed.

As of May 2004, median annual earnings of meeting and convention planners were \$39,620; half earned more than this amount, and half earned less. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$65,060, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$24,660. These data do not cover self-employed planners.

Job outlook

BLS projects that employment of meeting and convention planners will grow faster than the average for all occupations between 2002 and 2012. This employment growth stems from the expansion of business, globalization of the economy, and increased use of electronic forms of communication to bring people together. Some job openings are expected to arise from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the workforce permanently. Opportunities should be best for jobseekers who have a bachelor's degree and some meeting planning experience.

As businesses and organizations become more global, meetings and conventions become more important. In organizations spanning the country or the globe, a periodic meeting is often the only time that the organization can bring together all of its members. Despite the proliferation of alternative forms of communication—such as e-mail, videoconferencing, and the World Wide Web—face-to-face interaction is still necessary. In fact, new forms of communication foster interactions between individuals and groups that might not have occurred before. This development, in turn, increases the demand for meetings, which offer opportunities for personal interaction.

Industries that are experiencing rapid growth usually hold more meetings and conferences. For example, the fast-growing medical and pharmaceutical sectors are projected to have large increases in meeting activities; medical-related professional associations—which hold conventions to offer continuing education, training, and opportunities to exchange ideas that are vital to health-care professionals—are likely to arrange more meetings, thus creating more jobs for meeting planners in medical and pharmaceutical associations.

Demand for corporate meeting planners is highly susceptible to fluctuations in the business cycle because meetings are usually among the first expenses cut when budgets tighten. In associations, demand for planners is steadier because meetings are generally a source of revenue rather than an expense. But because fewer people are able to attend association meetings during recessions, associations often reduce their meeting staffs as well. Cutbacks are least likely in associations related to healthcare and other industries in which professionals are required to attend meetings to maintain their licensure.

Unlike workers in some occupations, meeting and convention planners can move to different industries relatively easily. This ability to transfer their skills across industries allows planners to respond to growth or decline in particular sectors of the economy.

Becoming a planner

Meeting and convention planners prepare for, enter, and advance in the occupation in a variety of ways. Many start in other occupations and gradually assume planning duties in addition to their other duties. For example, an

administrative assistant might plan a small meeting and gradually move into a full-time position as a meeting and convention planner. Other people seek out meeting and convention planning positions after gaining a variety of education and work experiences.

Some certifications and college-level courses in meeting and convention planning are available. But many of the skills needed, including those required to advance in the occupation, are learned through on-the-job experience.

Qualifications and training

Meeting and convention planners must have excellent interpersonal and communication skills. Fluency in multiple languages is a plus because some planners communicate with meeting attendees and speakers from around the world. Planners also must be detail-oriented and have excellent organizational skills. And they must be able to multitask, meet tight deadlines, and maintain their composure in a fast-paced, high-pressure environment.

Planners need quantitative and analytical skills to formulate and follow budgets and to understand and negotiate contracts. Computer skills, including the ability to use the Internet and financial and registration software, also are important. Over the course of their careers, planners may work in a number of different, unrelated industries, so they need to be able to learn about each new industry and coordinate appropriate programs.

About half of meeting and convention planners have a bachelor's degree, but it is not always required. The number of planners who have a degree has been increasing, in part because the work and responsibilities are becoming more complex. Many employers now prefer to hire workers who have higher levels of formal education. Useful undergraduate majors include marketing, public relations, communications, business, and hotel or hospitality management. Individuals who have studied hospitality management may start out with greater responsibilities than those who have other academic backgrounds.

At least two universities offer a concentration in meeting and event management at the bachelor's degree level. Additionally, a few colleges and universities offer associate degree and continuing education programs for meeting and convention planners. These programs are designed to train people who wish to enter the occupation and to develop the careers of experienced meeting profes-

sionals. Some programs require 40 to 100-plus classroom hours. Many programs range in duration from one semester to 2 years and award a certificate of completion.

For established meeting and convention planners, the Convention Industry Council offers the Certified Meeting Professional credential. This voluntary certification is widely recognized in the industry and might help meeting and convention planners to advance in their careers.

To qualify for the council's certification, candidates must have at least 3 years of meeting management experience, full-time employment in a meeting management capacity, and proof that they have successfully planned meetings. Those who qualify must then pass an examination that covers topics such as adult learning, financial management, facilities and services management, logistics, and program arrangement.

First jobs and beyond

Depending on their education, entry-level planners generally begin in the occupation by performing small tasks under the supervision of senior meeting professionals. For example, they might ask meeting-venue representatives for proposals and estimates and then discuss the resulting proposals with higher level planners. Or they might arrange meetings for committees and other small groups. Beginning planners might also assist in reviewing contracts; creating meeting timelines, schedules, or objectives; and registering convention attendees. Planners who start at small organizations must take on a larger, more varied number of tasks, and they therefore have an opportunity to learn more quickly.

Other people become planners after working in hotel sales or as marketing or catering coordinators. These hotel personnel work with numerous meeting planners, participate in negotiations for hotel services, and observe many different meetings—all of which teach them about meeting and convention planning. Workers who enter the occupation in this way often start at a higher level than those who have a bachelor's degree but no experience.

Because formal education is increasingly important, entry-level planners—especially those who do not have a degree—may enhance their professional standing by enrolling in meeting planning courses. These courses are offered by professional meeting and convention planning organizations, colleges, and universities.

Education alone is not enough for meeting and con-

vention planners to advance in the occupation, however. Although education may be an important factor in career advancement, experience and performance also are essential for planners.

To advance in the occupation, planners must take on more responsibility and find new and better ways of doing things in their organizations. The most important factors are determination, demonstrated skill on the job, and gaining the respect of others within the organization.

As meeting and convention planners prove themselves, they are given greater responsibilities. They might assume a wider range of duties or move to another planning specialty and gain experience in that area before moving to a higher level. For example, a planner responsible for meeting logistics as a conference coordinator might be promoted to program coordinator after demonstrating a flair for booking speakers and arranging a meeting's program.

Subsequent promotions could be to meeting manager, director of meetings, and director of meetings and education. Another path to promotion is for a planner to move from a small organization to a larger one, taking on responsibility for larger meetings and conventions in the process.

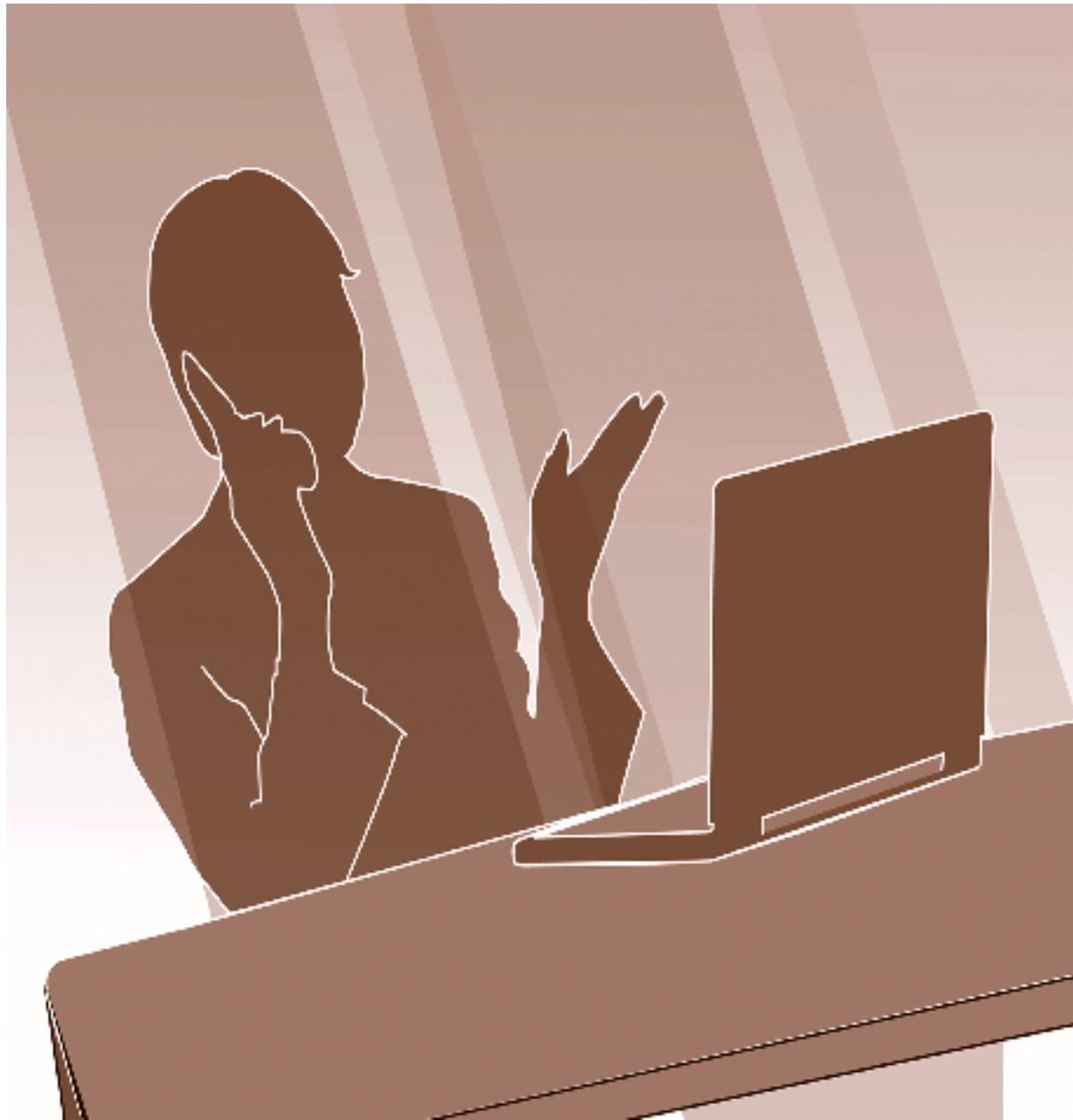
With significant experience, meeting planners may become independent meeting consultants, advance to vice president or executive director positions in associations, or start their own meeting planning firms.

Career resources

To continue researching careers in meeting and convention planning, visit your local library or career counselor. Look for books, periodicals, and other resources that describe the work that meeting and convention planners do.

One source of career information available at many libraries and in many career counseling offices is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* provides detailed occupational information about job duties, earnings, training requirements, and more. You also can find the *Handbook* online at www.bls.gov/oco.

Among the hundreds of occupations described in the *Handbook* are several that are similar to meeting and con-



vention planners. Producers and directors, travel agents, and food service managers, for example, use logistical and interpersonal skills to coordinate activities and make other arrangements. And public relations specialists and managers, like meeting and convention planners, help organizations promote goodwill or communicate a specific message.

Training, development, and other career information about meeting and convention planners is also available from the following membership organizations.

For information about meeting planner certification, contact:

Convention Industry Council
8201 Greensboro Dr., Suite 300
McLean, VA 22102-3814
1 (800) 725-8982 (toll-free)
(703) 610-9030
www.conventionindustry.org

For information about internships and on-campus student meeting planning organizations, contact:

Professional Convention Management Association
2301 S. Lake Shore Dr., Suite 1001
Chicago, IL 60616-1419
(312) 423-7262
www.pcma.org

For information about meeting planning education, careers, and Women's Leadership Initiative Scholarships, contact:

Meeting Professionals International
3030 LBJ Fwy., Suite 1700
Dallas, TX 75344-2759
(972) 702-3000
www.mpiweb.org

The BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program provides employment and wage estimates for hundreds of occupations. The most recent data on meeting and convention planners are available online at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes131121.htm.

