

Leaving the Independent Life Behind *Taking Your Skills to a New Level*

Starting a business involves wearing all sorts of hats that are not required when you are working in a full-time job. As a meeting planner in a corporation, association, non-profit organization, or third-party meeting management company, if a vendor calls about an unpaid invoice, you probably contact the accounting department to determine when it was processed and mailed. As a small business owner, you have to put on your “Accounts Payable” hat when that same vendor calls. Besides being responsible for your company’s sales, marketing and public relations, bookkeeping, taxes, and legal affairs, you have the core of your business that still requires your attention – to manage and successfully implement your client’s meetings and events.

As an independent meeting planner, you have the ability to focus on the types of programs and clients you enjoy the most. For Carol Krugman, CMP, CMM, formerly CEO of the Krugman Group International Inc., this was why she started her business in 1990. She had worked for four years on the client side with a pharmaceutical company, and then spent six years working in a large medical education/communications agency in a senior management position. She had burned out completely on the agency life and on living in New York, and moved down to Florida to take a job outside of the meetings industry. The job did not turn out as planned, and she realized that, “I loved what I had been doing – just not where and how I was doing it.” Krugman says, “The core premise of the company was to remain small and customized. I did not want to grow it into a big company. I was fairly advanced in my career at that point and just wanted enough business and enough money to live comfortably.” Krugman grew her business from a one-person operation to a staff of four.

In the case of Linda Mansouria, CMP, CMM, President of Make It Happen, LLC, her foray into becoming an independent meeting planner started with a fax from her employer advising her that the company had gone bankrupt and she no longer had a job. She was the Director of Human Resources for Dateline Forwarding Services, Inc., an international freight forwarder, for eight years. In addition to her human resources responsibilities, Mansouria planned both domestic and international meetings for the company.

At the time she was laid off, human resource departments were downsizing because they were considered “a non-revenue producing department, similar to meeting planning departments,” says Mansouria. She went to the Career Action Center to research options and initially teamed up with another event planner through the Center. She also worked through the Hospitality Group, a temporary agency, on a part-time basis to learn the hotel side of the business.

In 1996, Mansouria started Make It Happen, LLC. Within a two-year period, the business had grown to the point where she hired one employee and eventually brought on a second person. “Being able to schedule my own time and the flexibility of learning many different types of client industry businesses has been the most rewarding part of running my business,” says Mansouria. Krugman echoes this sentiment because she was “able to pick and choose with whom I wanted to work and the types of projects I wanted to work on; I was in control of choices that I didn’t have at the agency. I had the freedom to control with whom I dealt with each day.”

The Small Business-Person's Dilemma

Balancing the necessities of running a business – accounting, taxes, marketing, sales, hiring employees and/or contractors – with the operational side of planning meetings and events is not an easy thing to do. “I never really wanted to become a small business owner and yet that is what I was. I didn't have either the background or the skills for that. I had to learn it all along the way. The business part was something that I had to deal with,” says Krugman. The choice an independent planner has is to either wear all of those hats or hire other people to handle them. For Krugman, it meant, “Hiring more people so I could focus on the meeting planning but taking on staff is a double-edged sword.” “To support more people, I had to generate more business.”

The Business Climate Has Changed

During the dot-com boom, companies were putting together lavish meetings and events and business was robust for independent meeting planners. Ever since the demise of the dot-coms, the global economy has experienced some serious changes. The events of September 11, 2001 significantly affected U.S. based and international meetings. “After the dot-com bust, 9/11, the Enron debacle, and the beginning of Sarbanes-Oxley, larger corporations wanted to partner with larger [meeting planning] companies and didn't want to work with home-based businesses,” Mansouria says.

Krugman ended up paying staff out of her own pocket for six months after 9/11 as a way of insuring that they were able to keep their jobs. She found that with the industry changing, it was becoming more difficult to sustain the level of business necessary to survive and thrive. “With the shift towards procurement the last five years, boutique agencies have been facing greater challenges than ever. I saw the paradigm shift and it was clear that no matter how much we could contribute, our clients did not have either the ability or the authority to hire us any longer.”

Mansouria has also found it becoming more difficult to get new business and keep existing clients; she recently lost a big client because it had to go through the company's procurement department. Audrey Johnson with Event Management, Inc. out of Corcoran, MN, has experienced the same thing. She lost her largest client to a larger meeting planning company. “I understand corporations need to move forward and continue to look for better procedures/costs, etc.,” says Johnson. “And yes, it does make you examine your roll in the meeting planning industry as an independent. Even the larger meeting planning companies continue to use us as a third party for location purposes. We're not a dwindling breed”, she says, “we just have to change our angle and redefine our worth.”

Taking Your Experience to a New Level

One way for independent planners to continue competing for business from large corporations is for them to create strategic partnerships and alliances with planners in other states. “If I were twenty years younger, I would take out a business loan and create a strategic partnership with other independents nationally and globally so I could market my business as a ‘larger’ entity,” says Mansouria. “Destination management companies have begun doing this and are being successful at securing corporate clients because they can assure them that the quality of their strategic partner companies will provide the same quality of service.”

Another option is to take the skills and experience gained as an independent planner and bring them in-house with a corporation, association/non-profit, or third party planning company. That is exactly what Carol Krugman decided to do. She realized she had taken the company and her staff as far as she could go. “Although I had become a successful small business owner, I knew that it was time for a change. My

company was becoming an anachronism and that's not what I wanted to have happen to it. I had a great run and it was time to move on – it was as simple as that,” Krugman says.

Krugman used her MPI network and one of the people she conferred with was David Rich, Vice President, Strategic Marketing/Worldwide, at The George P. Johnson Company (GPJ). “GPJ is always looking for the best talent they can find and because I have such a variety of skills and experience, I can make a contribution in several areas,” say Krugman. “As an accomplished veteran with twenty-five years experience both in the field and as a teacher/trainer of other planners, I have the ability to teach, train, establish performance standards, and serve as an internal consultant to the company's planners in the 14 offices they have around the world. In addition, my extensive experience in the pharmaceutical and health care markets brings additional expertise in-house to help GPJ to grow in these areas.” As a result, Krugman accepted a position as Director, Client Services at The George P. Johnson Company in June 2006.

In Linda Mansouria's case, she is making the change in a more gradual fashion. She sees the industry changing and wants to be ahead of the curve. Michele Snock, Manager, Meeting Services, Cisco Systems, approached her about coming on board as a contractor but Linda declined initially because she was waiting to hear about several bids. When Michele contacted her a second time, Linda accepted the opportunity because none of those bids had come through and she had just lost a big client. At Cisco Systems, she is working on the company's larger, more complex meetings. In addition, she was asked to apply for a full-time Supervisor position in the meetings department. If offered the position, I will have to close the doors at Make It Happen LLC,” says Linda. “This [would be] a major change and decision in my life.”

Letting Go of the Independent's Life

One of the reasons most independent meeting planners start their business is that they want the freedom to pick the projects they work on and the ability to work with a diverse client base. Unfortunately, an independent business owner has more responsibilities and liabilities that they must assume. In Krugman's case, she was happy to shed these because they were beginning to crush her enthusiasm. “Any perceived loss of freedom was more than balanced by relinquishing those responsibilities,” says Krugman. “I now have a regular salary and substantial benefits, which are very important at this point in my life.”

Mansouria agrees that having a consistent income coming in the door is a real benefit. She sees herself working for about another ten years and wants to “sock away as much money as possible for my retirement”. She says another advantage to working for a corporation is having peer professionals to network with and colleagues who are great sounding boards.

Readjusting to a Full-Time Job

It takes time to readjust to being in an office on a daily basis. The key is to decide what things you are willing to put up with because you will no longer have control over deciding what you do everyday. Consider how important is it to have your opinions valued and how much direct contact would you like to have with upper management.

For Krugman, it was an evolutionary process that took about two years to complete. “Don't be in a hurry to end up in jail,” she says. “I wanted to be able to work in a larger arena and have the opportunity to take everything from my twenty-five year career to the next level. GPJ is a company that is on the cutting-edge in this industry and is a truly global company, so it was a good fit.”

Working in a full-time job means that you will have to readjust to having a boss again. For Carol Krugman, the most important quotient was who would be her boss. “If I could work for someone whose intellect and vision were above average, someone from whom I could learn new things and whose professionalism was equal to my own”, she says, “then it would not be difficult at all to no longer be the boss. There was an immediate click the moment I met my current boss [at GPJ], Jeff Rutchik, Manager, PR and Corporate Communications.”

Independent Planner Make Great Full-Time Employees Because...

Employers frequently have concerns about candidates whose most recent work is as an independent meeting planner. They worry that these individuals will not be able to adjust to a structured work setting or that will not be able to adapt to working in a team environment. It is important to communicate clearly that you have solid leadership skills because you have managed staff and/or contractors, and that you can build a team as well as work in a team environment. Be sure to note your ability to handle a variety of responsibilities as a business owner has taught you to multitask and be flexible. Running a business has taught you how to develop business objectives and practices. Learning how to deal with a variety of clients has heightened your communication skills.

Examine every aspect of what you do currently as an independent meeting planner and determine what you enjoy doing the most. What gets you excited when you get up in the morning? If you like cultivating and generating new clients, a position as an Account Manager or managing Client Services in an agency/third-party meeting management company might be a good fit. If you enjoy handling the logistics and operations, then maybe a position as the Director of Operations is the key. Maybe you worked with clients in a particular industry such as pharmaceuticals or manufacturing. If so, then look for positions in similar companies who will find your knowledge base as an asset.

For Carol Krugman, this move is an opportunity to grow even more professionally. “This is the third time I have completely transformed my life. I’m getting much more balance and perspective in my life, which validates my decision.”

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