USE THE "FORCE"
HOW TECHNOLOGY CAN ASSIST IN EVENT PLANNING

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Call it what you want—improving work processes, simplifying tasks, cutting corners or just working smarter. In our busy lives as event planners, we welcome opportunities to save time and get the job done efficiently. The good news is that help is close at hand in the form of a “force” almost as magical as that summoned by Luke Skywalker in Star Wars. In fact, like that force, it is all around us. Sometimes we can’t see it while it works its magic, but we use it many times during any given day. The “force” I speak of is technology and it can help make the work of event planning much easier.
Technology: Trends in Campus Activities

If your institution is already using some form of electronic event planning program, you are probably ahead of the game. Even if that is the case, I hope to help you find new ways to look at some other processes in your office. I will focus on one particular comprehensive program I created using a common desktop computer application and conclude by touching on a few other ways to utilize the technology available to you to create simple, easy-to-use files that can make your work life easier.

If your institution is like mine, your laundry list of event details might look something like this:

- Contact agent for details about performer;
- Submit event approval form to reserve room;
- Originate institutional contract;
- Contact technical staff with requirements per rider;
- Create promotional materials;
- Issue payment;
- Reserve hotel rooms;
- Forward artist's contact information to radio and TV stations;
- Update Web site with performer bio and links to Web sites; and
- Determine who will be on duty the night of the event.

Additionally, you have to track all of your paperwork, balance the budget, and if seeing each of these items through to completion has been delegated to others, you must constantly follow up with staff. At an institution like mine that requests anywhere from 40 to 60 contracts per semester, that work can become tedious and difficult to manage.

Exploring One Solution

Maybe it was my degree in computer science, or maybe it was my desire—or rather, the necessity—to make my job a little easier. It could have been the torturous four-page event planning form we were required to fill out by hand for each event. Regardless of the impetus, I knew that commonly available technology offered a solution for streamlining our planning processes. So, I created a Microsoft (MS) Access file to organize our event planning information— and you can, too.

If you are familiar with MS Access, you might be aware of the program's ability to create a visually pleasing form from dreary columns of information in a database. If you are using a paper version of an event planning form, just imagine what it would look like in electronic format. If you are not familiar with the program, there is no need to worry because the form can be created for you by the database program.

Start by generating a list of everything you need to keep track of—from date, time and location of the performance to hotel information, artist and agent contact info, technical needs and promotional ideas. Next, ask the rest of your staff involved in event planning and implementation what information they would like to collect and how they would like to receive it. Once you have finalized your list, you can begin creating your database. You can always add and delete items later, but the more information you have at the start, the easier it will be.

When you open the MS Access program, the main database window will pop up and give you the option to create a "Table" in "Design View." This is where you enter in all of the information on your list and specify the type of field that will show up on your form. For example, you might want to keep track of the date your contract was mailed (make this a "Date" field), but you may just want to note whether or not it was returned signed (make this a "Yes/No" field).

When all of your information is in the table and you save it where you want to store it— I suggest a shared folder on a network so many people can access it from their own computers—you can return to the original database window that popped up when you opened Access and create a "Form" using "Form Wizard." The Wizard will guide you through the steps, asking you which fields (all of the items you just entered) you want to use and what you want it to look like. I suggest naming the file the same as the table you just created. This will make keeping track of which semester's events go with which form much easier. When the Wizard works its magic, you can drag and drop or change the size and shape of any field you wish until the form looks the way you want it.

Making Your Job Easier

Now that all of your event information is in one compact and comprehensive place, you can use it to make your job easier. Utilizing the "Mail Merge" or "Import Data" functions in MS Word or Excel respectively, you can dump all of your event information into files and documents you currently might be creating from scratch or tediously entering information into for each event.

For example, I have created all of the following documents utilizing our event-managing database:

- Institutional contracts;
- A spreadsheet for technical services staff with date, time, location and technical requirements for each event;
- Poster assignment sheets for each event with all necessary information, as well as ideas for promotion or design;
- A semester-long marketing plan;
- A printout of hotel rooms needed for each performer to fax to the hotel with a spot for them to enter in confirmation numbers for each act;
- Artist contact information sheets to send to the radio station for interview and promotional purposes;
- Budget printouts with totals by category, semester and year;
- Semester event attendance reports;
- A document for our Web page developer with event information, artist bio and Web site links; and
- Envelopes and labels.
The database has been through many revisions depending on the need of our office staff at any particular time. At the end of each year, we review the file and determine what we do and do not use, and what we need to add. You can create your own file based on your needs, and when you experiment a little, you can change the physical appearance of it, how it opens and what it does.

**THERE ARE IDEAD MANY WAYS TO USE THE “FORCE” OF TECHNOLOGY TO MAKE PLANNING EVENTS EASIER.**

**Pursuing Other Solutions**

There are indeed many ways to use the “force” of technology to make planning events easier. Your institution likely uses a mainframe to coordinate class schedules, store student information and administer human resources policies and other functions. Working with your information technology staff may uncover ways that the mainframe can help you and other departments. For example, we have modified the room reservation function on our mainframe so all student affairs departments can track and label events that meet certain educational requirements, including those that are specified by the Clery Act (a law requiring colleges to disclose information about crime on and around their campuses).

I use a similar (but less complex) form in MS Access to track all of the calls I make and receive. It is often difficult to remember all of the details that were discussed during calls, so typing quick notes for each call creates a record I can refer to when necessary. Additionally, if you are anything like me, you forget names the minute you hear them, so having a record of them is often a lifesaver.
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Staring at a budget file for a semester or particular series of events can give you a headache as the events and details pile up. It is likely that your institution uses MS Excel or some other spreadsheet to track budgets. Utilizing the flexibility and inter-connectedness of the worksheets in an Excel file can make organizing information easier. From the main budget page, you can create a worksheet for each line item (contracts, prizes, food, hotels, promotion, supplies, etc.) or event (Formal Dance, Spring Fling, Create-A-Gift, etc.) to make tracking the small details of each event easier.

For example, if you are planning a formal dance, you may purchase decorations from a number of different locations, but entering all that information into one sheet also containing the details of all your other events makes the document long and confusing. Having the ability to create individual budget forms for each event will not only be easier on your eyes, but more convenient to pass out to committee members and easier to refer to when the time comes to request your budget for next year. Using the ability to link cells from different worksheets together (usually by placing an equals sign (=) in a cell and clicking on the cell you want to link) cuts down on errors and time spent re-entering information. Additionally, using hyperlinks within the document will make jumping from the main page to the breakdown sheets a breeze.

Being “Force”-ful

These are just a few ideas for the practical use of technology in event planning. I hope you find them helpful in sparking some of your own ideas or at least leading you to examine the work you do and the technology available to help you accomplish it more efficiently. In the May issue of Programming, I plan to share ideas on using technology to promote events. Until then, may the “force” be with you.

Editor’s Note: Specific software is mentioned in this article for illustrative purposes and does not imply an endorsement on the part of the author or NACA.

About the Author

Dex Tuttle is assistant director for Programming at Pennsylvania College of Technology. He holds a bachelor’s degree in computer science from North Dakota State University and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in college student affairs at The Pennsylvania State University. While a student at NDSU, he served on the student programming board. He later worked at the school as coordinator for Campus Programs and Student Organizations. Active in NACA, he held several positions in the former NACA Upper Midwest Region. He also held the position of Educational Exhibits Coordinator for the 2005 NACA National Convention in Minneapolis, MN. More recently, he served as a Showcase Selection Committee member and as assistant CAMP coordinator for the NACA Mid Atlantic Region.

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