

CAREER PATH

Missy Johnson, CMP



After nearly two decades spent in the hospitality industry — starting in hotel sales, moving over to meeting planning at a medical association, and then creating a new meeting-planner role at a corporation — Missy Johnson has decided to hang out her own shingle. Here's how her “linear way” has culminated in MJMeetings, fresh off the launch pad.

How did you get your start in this industry?

Right out of college, I started working for Hyatt Hotels here in Kansas City. I had decided to try to find a job that would allow me to work on my master's degree — a part-time evening program — so it worked out well for me to get started as an administrative assistant in the sales department there. I

was doing that for about three years while I was working on my master's, and then made the jump into sales at the same hotel. I did that for a short time before realizing that, A, I wasn't very good at sales, and B, I didn't really want to be in the hospitality industry on that side of the business.

I had been exposed to the meeting-planner role and decided that I was going to try to aggressively seek a meeting-planner position. So I networked with some pretty senior people, both at the hotel and just locally in Kansas City, to try to make that happen. And after about five years with Hyatt, I secured a meeting-planner role at the American Academy of Family Physicians [AAFP], based here in Kansas City.

It was a great place to learn the fundamentals of meeting planning, because the manager there at the time was really good at training young professionals. I stayed there for about four years, at which time I decided to go challenge myself even more, and I went to work for a small association management company called Applied Management Professionals. I was a meeting manager there for about three years, and that was a great change for me — it basically changed my perspective, [as] I was planning larger meetings for smaller associations.

Then the AAFP came calling again. They asked me if I'd be interested in coming back and serving as the manager of the department. I had two planners, a registration specialist, and an administrative assistant all under me at the time that I went back there. I stayed for about four years, and that was a great experience, because that was my first opportunity to manage people while at the same time managing meetings — my department was in charge of planning over 50 meetings a year. What I found was I really liked the aspect of coaching and training and mentoring.

What happened next?

I was just thinking, *Gosh, I really want a new challenge* — and that's when Lockton Companies came calling. They had just posted a new position for a manager of meeting services — they had never had a professional in the role before, they had always had administrative assistants doing their meeting planning prior to that. And so the recruiter just started mining through LinkedIn to find qualified candidates to potentially interview, and she reached out to me and said, “I've looked at your LinkedIn profile and I really feel like you're a great fit for this role. Would you be interested in interviewing?” What a crazy way to get a job interview!

Even though I was happy at AAFP, I feel like you always owe it to yourself to look at the opportunities that are

presented to you. The more I talked to them, the more I realized it was kind of the challenge I was looking for next. It was an opportunity to get on the corporate-planner side, which I had never done before, and to leave the management stuff, the management of people, behind for a while. I was excited to step back for a moment and refocus on meetings and the whole corporate experience.

I worked for Lockton for about two-and-a-half years. It was kind of an education process from me to the management team from the very beginning that never stopped. I was always demonstrating to them what a professional meeting planner can bring to the role as compared to the administrative assistant handling everything. I was making a case that they needed to allow me to hire somebody and they didn't want to support that — it was clear to me that they really didn't value the role in the way that I had hoped that they would and they weren't really willing to invest in that. We sort of made a mutual separation. I had already been thinking the next logical step for me would be to start my own company. And this just sort of forced my hand.

I just made the leap. And so here we are. I spent the last couple of months just really trying to get the infrastructure of the business in place. The end of the year is never a great time to launch a new company, so I just took that time toward the end of last year to get all the pieces in place and position myself to really start marketing right after the first of the year.

Could you talk about the differences in all these roles — associate, corporate, independent planner?

That's a path that I took without realizing it was kind of perfect for me. Starting on the hotel side, getting that background of the inner workings of a large hotel, moving then to a planner role at a large association where I was exposed to a lot of different people and the association model in general, and then working for a corporation where everything is very short-term and different in terms of priorities. It's not based on members' needs or an overall strategic plan; it's very much more based on "Well, this is what our CEO wants to do, so we're going to make it happen" kind of decision-making.

I wasn't really ever a great fit in the corporate environment, and I know that now. I was so at home in the association-environment model of working together for the greater good — a strategic focus based on member needs. And

the corporate environment is just very schizophrenic in a way. Making the decision to go out on my own was, "Listen, there's nobody that can be a better boss for you than yourself." I think it was the perfect sort of linear way for me to go through the industry, because I picked up lessons along the way that led me to the point of being able to have the confidence to go out and be my own boss.

What's your focus as an independent planner?

I feel like there's a niche for me to be able to offer my experience and expertise to the small- to medium-sized association who may or may not have a full-time meeting planner on staff — [if they have a planner on staff, I] can supplement the work that they're doing. Also [to help] other executives within that smaller association on everything related to meetings and events and with their strategy. I can fill that gap for them in a way that can not only save them money but make their meeting more of an event, and a much higher quality.

Has there been anything that has been especially surprising about your transition?

I think the most surprising thing to me has been how fairly easy it is to get started. If you're going to work from your home office, it's a matter of a few legal documents to get you official. The building a website, the networking with your existing network to get the word out, and then really just sort of setting up shop — it's been surprisingly easy to get it going. Ask me six months from now if I have enough business to sustain myself — but I feel like I've got some really important and probable prospects in the pipeline that are going to allow me the opportunity to make this work.

What advice would you give to someone who is just getting started in the industry?

Network, network, network! Align yourself with a great organization like PCMA, and then don't be afraid to introduce yourself to new people at networking events. You'll be amazed how quickly your network expands. In addition, seek out a mentor (or two) who you can go to for real advice about the industry, your career decisions, and navigating workplace culture. Then remember to cultivate those relationships over time. ●

— Katie Kervin

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