

## Event Issues Number 6 : The Problem of Operations

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When we started teaching event management in Sydney in 1997, I was surprised to hear one of the lecturers comment “we will not be teaching them how to plug in a sound system”. The implication was that we would teach management and not the day-to-day operations. Having spend over thirty years “plugging in sound systems”, handing out leaflets and switching off the lights after the event, I was surprised at this demarcation between operations and management.

Over the last 10 years, I have seen the distinction grow into the basis of event education. I feel that it is time we put a stop to this.

In the event environment management and operations are intertwined. They are not separate. The reasons are:

1. **The Deadline.** With the deadline of the event, the operations take on an importance not found in other industries. The deadline means that the event must be right the first time. It can not be corrected after the mistakes. The theatrical play in a theatre season, for example, can improve with each night. The manufacture of a product can improve over time. Software development, for example, can undergo upgrades. Most events, such as special events and large public festivals, have to be right the first time.

2. **Operational risks** are the big risks for events. The disasters generally occur at the event itself and involve operational issues. Crowd control, food poisoning, high wind and electricity problems are all in the realm of operations. There are ‘up stream’ causes of these risks and they are often found in the management of the event. However, knowledge and experience in the event operations allows the management team of the event to understand the operational implications of any decision.

3. The **complexity and uncertainty** of the event environment. In special event and large events, such as public festivals, the decisions made by the event team are highly complex and always have a strong element of time. There are mini-deadlines. A decision made at a specific time will have a different risk profile than if it was made at another time. Most decisions in this dynamic environment will have operational implications. The time needed to consult is a luxury. In most cases the decisions have to be made quickly and first hand knowledge of operations is essential.

4. **Event teams are small** in number when compared to other businesses. The current management texts and thinking used in management teaching arose from large organisations. In the large organisation, specialisation and demarcation are essential to efficiency. In a small team, cross-skills and a knowledge of day to day operations are essential. The model currently used to define management in the Universities and colleges courses is not applicable to the event environment.

It is an artificial and damaging distinction to make when educating young people in event management. Operations should be a core skill for the teaching of special event management and public event management. It has to be integrated into the normal management teaching. It is a practical skill and has to be taught on-site and by people who have those skills.

As I travel the world training event and festival managers and coordinators, I ask about their operational or on-site skills. In practice, I always ask, “If you have to, who can plug in a sound system or drive a forklift?”. Invariably, it is the practicing and successful event managers who raise their hands.