



COLUMN

Special Ops

Laura Cole, freelance operations manager and EN30/30 member, on how all the hard graft and numerous hours working on successful shows are a badge of honour

Blood, sweat and tears

I am often asked what made me want to pursue a career in operations – the answer? Why it was for the glamour, of course.

When choosing to complete an events management degree 10 years ago, I knew it was because I wanted to rise up within an exciting industry, to be part of something live and impactful, and to enjoy a job that wouldn't keep me confined to an office.

In my eyes, the events industry was glamorous and exciting with lots of perks, and it seemed ideal.

My suspicions were confirmed when, as an 18-year-old, I visited the Clothes Show Live at Birmingham NEC. When I saw the professional events teams walking around, suited and booted with their walkie-talkies, I knew that an events career was for me.

It will come as no surprise to hear that I was a little naive back then, and it amuses me when people outside of the industry still have that same perception of glitz and glamour.

Little do they realise, no less than 12 hours before a show officially opens, the ops team are still shedding blood, sweat and tears behind the scenes, rocking a far less fashionable look that usually comprises of steel toe-capped boots, a fleece jacket, a high visibility vest - and maybe even a hardhat if you're lucky.

My first introduction into the real world of ops was back in 2007, when as a student I worked backstage on the Celebrity Chefs Kitchen Theatre at the Ideal Home Show – I worked 12-14 hours every day for five weeks straight – it was hard work, fast paced, unpredictable: I absolutely loved it.

I quickly learned that if you work in

ops, you need to think on your feet to make on-the-spot decisions, and to remain calm no matter what happens.

I took the skills that I learned from this experience into my career at Clarion Events, where I joined as an operations assistant, and dived headfirst into the work hard: play hard culture.

Not letting one affect the other, but enjoying the rewards of the hard work.

Over seven years I worked my way up to operations manager. The progression and development allowed me to experience many different shows, events and 'situations'. As I worked my way up the ladder I was facing bigger challenges and making bigger decisions.

That forgotten PDQ machine turned into the Holiday Home that wouldn't fit down the service road – 'can we widen the road?' the moment you turn round to your venue manager and tentatively ask if you can knock down a wall, are all things that I will never forget.

There's an acronym in operations known as 'KISS', (Keep It Simple, Stupid) which Grant Leboff touched upon in last month's *EN* – I can't say that it works all the time, and preparation is better than reaction.

But in operations it's your job to solve problems – sometimes the simplest solution really is the best, and you have to trust your instinct to remove obstacles effectively and efficiently.

From venue toilets running out of water, to a heating system breaking down in the middle of January, a day long 'discussion' about a £1 parking fee to fire evacuations; successful

and failed events – my tenacity and professionalism has certainly been put to the test over the years. But for me, it's the challenges of my job that make working in the events industry truly fantastic. The excitement you feel when things go right and the learning you gain when things don't always go to plan.

I'm now a freelance operations manager, and I'm applying my experiences to new challenges at events all around the world. My teenage dreams of a glamorous events life soon faded, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't absolutely broken by the end of every show.

But in a way, that exhaustion is a badge of honour that tells me I put in 110 per cent – and the tremendous satisfaction, achievement and pride I feel after a successful event makes everything worthwhile.

Oh, and that table we were given at the Brit Awards didn't hurt, either.

