

BOTTOM LINE

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PETER MARTIN THE GAZETTE

Josée Davignon, president of Avec Brio, has arranged corporate events for between 20 and 800 people, including large events at Montreal's casino.

Women in business | Being part of the workforce from the time she was a teenager gave Josée Davignon the experience and confidence to open an event co-ordinating company

Events on the move

SARAH DOUGHERTY
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

On the go in the workforce since the age of 18, Josée Davignon hadn't had time to catch her breath.

She had an inkling she'd enjoy event organizing, but had no experience in the field and few formal credentials.

So she decided to offer her services free. She got her first test with a team mounting a corporate conference at Mont Tremblant.

"At one point, I was told to find a piano," Davignon said. "By the afternoon."

Davignon proved her mettle, getting the instrument and impressing her colleagues.

"After that I said, 'Why look farther when this is what I can do?'" she said.

Davignon launched into business, creating a one-woman corporate event-organizing company, **Avec Brio**.

Since 1998, she has put together cocktails and employment fairs, golf tournaments and gala dinners. Working with musicians and comedians, masters of ceremonies and lighting technicians, she's co-ordinated events for 20 to 800 people.

"I have the capacity to foresee the needs of people," said Davignon, an animated, petite woman. "I learn by doing and I learn quickly."

Davignon, now 33, had to land on her feet. She left home in a hurry, taking a job with trucking company Transport Guilbault in Boucherville as a teenager.

"I started at the bottom," Davignon said of that job, which had her handling the logistics of everything from

bills of lading and merchandise going out to truck weights.

Davignon rose to become head of her department at 23. She credits her promotion to her ability to handle stress and manage teams.

After working for another trucking company, Davignon started to look beyond the day-to-day to figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

She credits a mentor with helping her recognize her potential.

Davignon met motivational speaker Andrée Jété after attending some of her conferences on stress management and personal empowerment.

"She gave me an outside point of view on who I was," Davignon said of Jété. "She made me see the possibilities."

From there, Davignon did some soul searching. "I didn't ask myself how to

make money or what type of people I wanted to be around," Davignon said. "I asked myself what gave me pleasure." She decided satisfaction would come from helping people. Avec Brio fit the bill.

Being in a service business, Davignon didn't need a lot of overhead. Her first piece of office equipment was a cell phone, paid for out of her first contract.

She also landed two small grants from the **Service d'aide aux jeunes entrepreneurs**, a non-profit organization that assists young businesspeople.

Even though she worked from home at first, Davignon treated it like an office. "I took a shower, put on makeup and dressed for business every day," she said. "Without that, I would have lost motivation."

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Events | Clients include Via Rail and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens

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Davignon got her first clients by working with established players in event organizing in Montreal when they needed help. And cold calls were - and still are - part of her routine.

Davignon has also invested a lot in networking. She joined the **Jeune chambre de commerce de Montréal**. Every month, she meets with a small group of entrepreneurs, exchanging advice and support.

"And we challenge each other, which is important, because when you're on your own, no one is challenging you," she said.

Avec Brio's client list includes **Via Rail Canada**, which hired Davignon to organize a station inauguration, and **Les Grands Ballets Canadiens**, which signed up Davignon to co-ordinate a fundraising event.

Manon Landry, executive director of the **Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de l'Est de l'île de Montréal**, has

worked with Davignon on the organization's annual awards gala.

"Josée will go out and get partners, whether it's a master of ceremonies or an artistic director," Landry said. "She has a way of working that is friendly but also very efficient."

"I offer an all-in-one service," Davignon said. "I've learned how to find people I need, like a singer or comedian, technical person or public-relations expert."

Although she's still hands-on, overseeing the logistics of her

events, Davignon is slowly handing off some of those responsibilities to two people who work for her on contract.

"I want to let go of the production side, which takes a lot of hours," she explained. "Then I'll be more free to manage client relations."

During events, Davignon might work one or two weeks straight. Average weeks run to 50 hours. "I'm just starting to have some balance," she said of her schedule. "As an entrepreneur,

you have to be able to switch off and enjoy your time away."

Davignon credits her determination, sense of organization and ability to juggle a lot in her head with her success.

And because she knows her mentor was key, she's trying to encourage others. Davignon gives talks to young people in difficulty through PITREM, a Montreal-based community group.

"I try to give them the idea that they have a place somewhere," she said. "That's what my men-

tor taught me."

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