

YEAR-END: TAKING STOCK

## For a quiet week, a you-time carol

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Special to The Globe and Mail

December 21, 2007

For many, next week will seem like a writeoff: knock off work early on Monday, Christmas Eve; observe Christmas on Tuesday; Boxing Day bargain-hunting on Wednesday; then return to some semblance of work on Thursday and Friday.

It may seem like a waste of time trudging into the office but the abridged workweek can be put to good use, career advisers say. Indeed, some experts consider the days between Christmas and New Year as the most valuable of the year for your career. They provide some quiet time to reflect on your job, what accomplishments were achieved in 2007 and what strategy to take to boost your career in 2008.

Here are tips for using the holiday time to advantage.

### UNPLUG YOURSELF

The year-end is the perfect time to step off the hamster wheel of work and focus on yourself, says Halifax career coach Karen Schaffer, author of *The Job of Your Life*. "Most of us are snowed under all year by to-do lists that just keep growing. Before you know it, you're caught in a never-ending work cycle."

But getting off that wheel is easier said than done, she concedes. That's because we tend to equate working with acting - whether we're picking up the phone, responding to e-mail or making business decisions. And yet, ironically, in order to evaluate your job progress, you need to stop acting.

"You actually have to start by stopping," she says. "Just tell everyone you're on vacation. Let the machine answer work calls, set your e-mail with a line that says you're AWOL, turn off your BlackBerry.

"Consciously force yourself to take a break."

Otherwise, you can't step back and gain perspective on where you've been this year, and where you're going next.

## **BACKWARDS THINKING**

Use the downtime to evaluate the highs and lows of your work performance in 2007.

"In particular, you want to identify your best pattern of success," says Mary-Frances Fox, head of Work Creatively Career Advisers in Toronto.

These are the qualities you consistently bring to every project, she says, such as your ability to turn ideas into reality, or the way you consult on projects with warmth, innovation and integrity.

To find your pattern, recall your shining moments, then ask yourself: Why did you succeed? What traits did you bring to the table?

Once you figure out your strengths, you can take on roles that really bring out the best in you, while at the same time letting others know how to best utilize your skill set.

"By focusing on your track record, rather than specific credentials or job history, you can show managers, or even prospective employers, what they may not realize: that you don't need extra training," she explains. "You're already set to take on new and different roles."

## **ARTICULATE GOALS**

Of course, there's always room for improvement in the coming year. Ms. Schaffer suggests starting with one clear vision and then establishing three concrete goals to turn that vision into reality.

For example, say your vision is "I will step into a leadership role in 2008." To strive for that in the new year, you might resolve to sign up for a leadership conference; ask your boss for more challenging work that plays to your leadership strengths; and apply for every relevant job posting.

Each of your goals should be specific, actionable, realistic and timely, adds Toronto-based executive coach Lindsay Sukornyk, founder of North Star Coaches.

"For instance, you don't just say: 'I'll keep myself informed in business.' You say: 'I'll read one Harvard Business Review article a month.' " Rather than making a vague promise to yourself, you now know exactly what you need to accomplish, and you'll know it's attainable, she says.

If you post those goals at your desk, you'll more likely follow through. "You want to see them every morning when you start your day."

## **OUT WITH THE OLD**

To make space for new opportunities, trash all the clutter that's no longer useful or relevant, says Michele Waters, who founded Career Quest Coaching in Victoria.

Clean out the filing cabinet, bookshelves, briefcase, resource materials and desk drawers, then tackle the e-mail crowding your inbox.

While you're at it, change any habits that are hindering your productivity, such as constant e-mail checking, Ms. Schaffer adds. One handy rule of thumb, she says, is to restrict your e-responses to certain times of day - such as 9 a.m., noon and 5 p.m.

"Say you need half an hour to delve into your work, and another two hours to finish it - impossible to do if you're checking e-mail every two minutes," Ms. Waters says.

## **FIXING PROBLEMS**

Now that your boss is also less distracted, you may want to knock on his door. "Think along the lines of help me-help you, and ask how you can support him even more in 2008," Ms. Sukornyk says.

You can also use this opportunity to share your concerns about what's not working at work. But be careful, Ms. Sukornyk warns. "Bosses are inundated with complaints about what's broken."

Rather than behaving like another whiner, she recommends first sitting down and coming up with some concrete solutions. Then, when you drop the bomb that the project management team is a scattered mess, for instance, you can immediately propose a fix.

"You follow your concern by telling the boss that to help organize the team, you'd like to set up Monday morning meetings, where all members clearly state their duties for the week," Ms. Sukornyk suggests. "Now, instead of just dumping a nightmare in his lap, you're proving that you're a team player with initiative."

## **SAY THANK YOU**

It's easy to focus on the obstacles to our success, and neglect to acknowledge what those around us did right, Ms. Schaffer says. While there's implied thanks in the office parties and gift exchanges, it's not the same as taking the time to actually say the words.

Review last year's calendar, Ms. Waters suggests, and reflect on who contributed to your 2007 accomplishments - who listened to your ideas, who encouraged you to take a risk, who shared your workload, who handed you that great client contact.

In return, she recommends expressing your appreciation in a meaningful way, anything from leaving a voicemail message, to a coffee invitation.

## **INVEST IN YOU**

Before booking your new calendar solid, make sure to pencil in those "investment items" that will benefit your career long-term, but somehow keep sinking to the bottom of your priority list, Ms. Sukornyk says.

She suggests slotting in two networking lunches a month with people you find interesting "because you never know where your next client, promotion, board membership or job will spring from."

Also, reserve some me-time for other career-building activities, such as reading industry articles, regular exercise and meetings with your team.

Above all, she insists that these items be non-negotiable. "Do whatever it takes not to let them vanish in the chaos of daily life," she says. "Even if you have to take off one morning a week to accomplish them."

### **KICK BACK AND ENJOY**

Finally, keep in mind that this holiday gives you an ideal excuse to spend quality time with your family and friends, Ms. Sukornyk says. The more you relax and refuel over the holidays, the more productive and creative you'll be on your return, she says.

So don't forget to breathe some fresh air into your lungs while you have the chance. "Get outside for a hike, a skate, or even some snowman-building. Or you just may find yourself caught in another never-ending cycle: the decadence of food-and-drink-fests."