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The Jungle / Focus on Recruitment, Pay and Getting Ahead ♦ By Erin White



Year End Is Timely For Taking Stock Of Career Growth

WORN OUT FROM audition competition while pursuing a career in voice-over work, Margaret Durante asked herself a big question as 2006 approached: "What's wrong with this picture?"

At this time of year, many people take stock of their careers. Sometimes, it's an

exercise in self-reflection. Other times, the assessment stems from envy-provoking holiday updates from friends and relatives. Either way, career counselors say, now's a good time to evaluate what's going well, what's not, and what changes should be made in the coming year.

Nella Barkley, president of coaching firm **Crystal-Barkley Corp.**, suggests taking a day toward the end of the year to spend time alone. "I love the week before the end of the year – it's a wonderful week to catch up with yourself," she says.

She recommends clients ask themselves questions about the past year: What have I learned? What skills have I acquired? Is what I'm working at still fun? Then, try some queries about the future: What's the next step? How soon do I want to take it? And what can I do to make it happen?

If workers realize they're not learning enough and they're not having fun, Ms. Barkley recommends figuring out a solution rather than hoping the situation will change on its own. An employee could sign up for outside professional training, or ask the boss if the company provides this.

If employees desire different responsibilities at work, they should research the possibilities and talk to the boss. Most important, "do something about it because you don't want to get 20 years down the line and saying it's not all adding up," she says.

Coaches note that a negative self-evaluation doesn't necessarily mean you have to quit. In fact, it's often better to see what changes can be made with a current employer before ditching the job.

Doug Matthews, a career coach and executive vice president of global operations for Right Management, a Philadelphia unit of **Manpower Inc.**, says the pressures of the holiday season can cause people to make snap decisions to

quit. A lower-than-expected bonus, a bad year-end review, or a conversation with a boastful relative can all put people in the mood to make abrupt decisions. But that may not be the best course, Mr. Matthews says.

Instead, he suggests employees ask themselves questions including: How long have I been unhappy? If the answer is nine to 12 months or more, it may be time for a change. Another good question: How much of my unhappiness is driven by my relationship with my boss? A change of boss – rather than an entirely new employer – could solve the problem. A third factor is the company's financial health. If the employer's financial outlook is shaky, a brighter career path might be found elsewhere. But if the company is growing, it may offer other jobs and other bosses better suited for unhappy employees.

Regardless, Mr. Matthews recommends talking with an objective, trusted third party before deciding to quit. The person could be a trusted mentor inside the company, or a professional in the human-resources department. Then, talk directly with your boss about the issue.

Career coaches urge evaluating what's going well, what's not and what to change.

Ms. Durante, of Stamford, Conn., left a public-relations job at a big publishing house several years ago to pursue voice-over work. Earlier in her career, she had worked in radio; she missed voice work. To earn money while auditioning, she decided she would do free-lance public-relations work.

After a couple of years competing for both voice-over and PR jobs, she felt worn down. She constantly had to sell herself on both fronts. As 2005 drew to a close, she asked herself what had gone wrong.

"I was a lousy salesman for myself," Ms. Durante says. She had trouble pushing beyond the rejections. Without a regular job providing a steady source of positive feedback, she couldn't build the confidence

she needed to pursue auditions. "I felt I needed to have something that was tangible," she says.

She'd always been interested in education, so she thought about teaching media relations to college students. She solicited advice from local college leaders, and enrolled in a master's program to bolster her credentials. She plans to complete her masters in 2008 and has talked with a local community college about possibly teaching a media-relations course.

Her coursework and teaching prospects have increased her sense of self worth. "I was able to put up with all the auditions that I didn't get because [I figured] 'the heck with them, I'm in charge, I'm going to school and I know I'm going to be able to teach,'" she says.

This fall, she landed two voice jobs for a publishing company. "The strategy worked," she says. "I was concentrating on the school work and I got the job without worrying about whether or not I would get voice-over jobs."

