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Turn those New Year's Vows into Career Action

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When planned and executed properly, the annual resolution rite can be a smart and well-timed strategy, MARJO JOHNE writes

With three young children, a full-time job as an accountant and seasonal part-time work preparing personal income tax returns, Cora Montes is plenty busy. But even with her tight schedule, Ms. Montes plans this year to sign up for a continuing education course at the University of Toronto.

"It's my New Year's resolution," says Ms. Montes, who works for a Rogers Communications Inc. wireless dealership. "I have promised myself that I will upgrade my skills this year by taking a corporate taxation course."

For many people, setting goals for the new year is an annual rite.

But making a New Year's career resolution should be more than just a nice tradition, says Toronto career coach [Lynne O'Connor](#), who runs her own private practice, [Advanced Career Coaching Inc.](#)

When planned and executed properly, a New Year's resolution can be a smart and well-timed career strategy, [Ms. O'Connor](#) says.

"The new year is the best time to look ahead from a professional and personal point of view and analyze what's important in your career," she says. "You're fresh from the holidays and having some time off usually gives people a different perspective of their workplace and how it fits in with who they are and what they have to offer."

Career-related New Year's resolutions are popular, ranking second behind weight loss at [mygoals.com](#), an on-line service that helps people meet their goals, says spokesman Anthony Helmstetter.

What do people aim for? Forty per cent of Canadian senior executives would like to acquire a new skill, according to a survey of 100 executives at 1,000 of Canada's biggest companies.

A quarter vow to spend less time at work, 10 per cent resolve to improve their relationships with their boss and co-workers, 8 per cent want to make a career change, 5 per cent hope to earn a promotion and 2 per cent seek a raise, found the survey by Accountemps, a temporary staffing service.

The start-of-year preoccupation with career matters is evident in the types of books people read around January and February, says Stephanie Lewis, a spokeswoman for Indigo Books & Music Inc., adding that, in the first two months of last year, sales of career books were up 9 per cent and 14 per cent, respectively, over December, 2004.

After all the parties, cocktails and business lunches of the holiday season, many people's business and social networks are freshly reinforced in January, making it easier to send out feelers for a new job or hook up with a mentor, [Ms. O'Connor](#) notes.

And for those who received a nice year-end bonus, the extra money could provide the confidence to decide to change jobs or the means to enroll in a professional development program, she says.

While there are many good reasons to make a New Year's career resolution, career experts caution against blithely setting goals. Emma Hamer, a career coach and management consultant with Hamer Associates in Vancouver, says that people often set themselves up for failure by not thinking through their career resolutions.

"Make sure the resolutions you make are the right ones," she says. "Do you really want a new job with a new company, or have you just reached a plateau in your current position and perhaps need to explore where else you can go in the company?"

[Ms. O'Connor](#) agrees. Embarking on such an exploration requires a career map, she says.

To create one, employees need to look at what they want to move away from, where they want to go and what they need to do to bridge the gap, she explains. Often people are surprised to realize they don't really know what they want in their career, [Ms. O'Connor](#) adds.

"I try to get folks to go back to where they last had fun in their jobs, where they lit up, were engaged, recognized and rewarded," she says. "This helps them see what they need and what they feel is lacking in their day-to-day contribution to the workplace."

Once they've identified the missing pieces of their career puzzle, the next step is to figure out how and where they can fill them in. Many people, especially those who have been in the same company or field for years, don't know what other career options exist, she notes.

"So they need to combine the internal soul-searching with research on what kinds of jobs are out there, and which employers they might want to work for," she says.

It's important to be realistic when setting career goals, she says.

Some people target positions way beyond their experience and skills.

While it's good to be ambitious, it's also necessary to recognize that the job you want may be two or three career moves away, [Ms. O'Connor](#) says.

Knowing this will help you create a career map that outlines how you get from one stepping stone to another until you reach your ultimate goal.

Some people find that the job they want is the one they already have.

Judy Plotkin, a social worker and employee counsellor with employee assistance program provider Warren-Shepell in Toronto, says discussing New Year's career resolutions with the boss is a good way to resuscitate job motivation.

“Sit down with your manager and go through your career goals for the coming year,” she suggests.

“This shows great initiative on your part in terms of wanting to make positive changes.”

A heart-to-heart with the boss was something Peter MacKay, deputy leader of the Conservative Party, squeezed into his schedule in December.

Mr. MacKay, whose New Year's career resolution was to “accomplish more,” says he met with party leader Stephen Harper over the Christmas holiday to talk about his goals for the new year.

Keeping a to-do list will also help him follow through, Mr. MacKay says.

“Actually, the list is more like a file folder now,” he adds.

David Crisp, a human resources and leadership consultant with Crisp Strategies Inc. in Toronto, says one of the biggest mistakes people make when setting a New Year's career resolution is not thinking about what they need to learn to achieve their goal.

Consequently, they're caught off guard when presented with an opportunity to move toward it.

“I was head of human resources for Hudson's Bay Co. for many years and there were occasions when I would approach an employee for a promotion and they'd say ‘I'd love to move up but I'm not ready,’“ he recalls.

In some cases, Ms. Hamer adds, people fail to realize they have to make certain sacrifices in order to fulfill a resolution.

For Ms. Montes, taking a corporate taxation course will mean more stress and less time with her husband and children. The three-month course requires her to attend class for three hours a week and spend at least two hours studying each evening.

“It will be very tough to manage this,” Ms. Montes says. “But [taking the course] will count towards my CGA [certified general accountant] designation, which I hope to get in two years' time.”

The burden of New Year's resolutions should not rest entirely on employees' shoulders, the experts add. Employers should also do their part to help their workers meet their career goals.

One way is to conduct performance reviews at the start of the year and use the sessions as an opportunity to set targets for the year ahead, Ms. Hamer suggests.

Linking incentive programs with New Year's resolutions could also motivate employees to perform better, Ms. Plotkin says.

However, she has some reservations about using the “New Year's resolution” label.

“There’s a general belief that resolutions are made to be broken, so maybe calling it a New Year’s incentive program ‘fresh start’ or something like that may be better,” she says.

But as the months go by, that “fresh start” feeling will, inevitably, wear off. To keep resolutions alive throughout the year, employees and employers must conduct periodic reviews of the target they set in January, Mr. Helmstetter suggests. And they need to give themselves constant reminders .

“Write your New Year’s resolution on a Post-It note and stick it on the bathroom mirror or on your bulletin board,” advises Mr. Helmstetter, whose company e-mails goal reminders to its clients.

“The trick to fulfilling a resolution is to have a plan, and then stay on track by sticking to that plan.”

Career check-up

Is it time for change? Take this 10-point career check-up from career coach [Lynne O’Connor](#) to figure out how well you and your job match or what you might want to do to make a better fit.

1. Would you apply for your job today if you saw it advertised?
2. How well does your current job suit your lifestyle? Do your work hours, commuting time and income fit the life you’re leading?
3. What are your strengths, and how often do you get to use them in your job?
4. What learning opportunities have you had in the last 12 months and how can you make the most of them?
5. If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be?
6. Realistically speaking, how possible are lateral or upward moves for you in your current company?
7. How well do the values of your current employer align with your own?
8. What are your relationships like with your boss, colleagues and co-workers?
9. If there were no limits on your resources, what professional development would you like to pursue? How might your current company support you on this?
10. Thinking long term, what do you still want to achieve in your career?

Marjo Johne

Work wish list

Executives were asked, 'If you were to make a career-related New Year's resolution, what would it be?' Their responses*:

Acquire a new skill 40%
Spend less time at work 25%
Improve relationship with boss/co-workers 10%
Make a career change 8%
Earn a promotion 5%
Earn a raise 2%
Other 5%
Don't know 5%

*Based on a survey of 100 senior executives at 1,000 of Canada's biggest companies.