

Experts says it's important to set workplace objectives now before '13 ends

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By Bill Toland / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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The holiday stretch is nearly here -- Halloween becomes Thanksgiving, then it's a mad race to Christmas. Your unused vacation days are piling up, and you know full well nothing gets done the last two weeks of December.

The fourth quarter is spent before it even gets started.

That means it's all the more important to set workplace goals now, before 2013 evaporates, says Philadelphia-area author and time-management expert Steve McClatchy.

"The brain has a bias in the way it makes decisions," favoring daily to-do list maintenance tasks over bigger goals, he said.

The problem with a narrow focus on the to-do list is that it never, ever clears itself (nor does your email inbox, which is consistently identified as one of the biggest workplace time-drains).

"The maintenance items of your life never go away. If you don't do them, they find you," Mr. McClatchy said.

Ideally, your fourth quarter would be a healthy mix of wrapup and introspection -- "a time of reflection in order to review what worked, what didn't and then adjust strategic plans accordingly," according to Success Trek, a Chicago-based workplace development firm.

"But realistically, it is often the time when employees are run ragged trying to hit lagging sales goals, launch last-minute projects to spend remaining budgets (so they don't get cut the following year), and manage day-to-day responsibilities with half the staff on vacation."

Time to put away the day to day to-do list and break out the calendar -- and that means making time for those bigger-picture goals.

Carving out time is easier said than done, especially when you seemed pressed for it, and it's going to result in the delay of some to-do list items.

"The question is, how far are you willing to be behind on your maintenance items to have a goal?" Mr. McClatchy said. "That goal is going to set you back."

So, before November comes, sit down with your calendar. Fill in the must-dos -- Thanksgiving trip to the in-laws, the all-day conferences, whatever else is imperative at home and at work. Then, fill in around those items with your weekly workplace benchmarks -- and, most importantly, commit to meeting those benchmarks.

Key to meeting those goals is learning to separate what's "urgent" from what's actually important, said Theresa Valade, CEO of Success Trek. Every boss or direct report has an allegedly urgent task or request for you to fill -- but is it really?

"The reality is, you have to pick and choose," she said. "You can't do it all in two months."

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