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REJUVENATION

Summertime, and the brain is mushy

It's a problem many face at this time of year - but career experts say you'd be wise to do whatever you can to snap out of it

WALLACE IMMEN
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The slow, steamy days of August are in full swing - and, like so many others on the job, Colin Buchanan can feel his brain turning to mush.

It's that time of year when many clients and co-workers are away on vacation, deadlines have been pushed forward, the atmosphere is decidedly more relaxed, and minds tend to wander and lose focus.

"For me, this downtime can be creative death," says Mr. Buchanan, president of Six Degrees Medical Consulting Inc. in Toronto. "I get bored stiff. After a few days, I find I'm losing my edge."

Without steps to work out his mental muscles, brain melt can persist for weeks, making it harder to kick up momentum and motivation in the fall, says Mr. Buchanan, whose 20-employee company designs marketing plans and clinical trials for drug companies.

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large image



Since the pressure is off, it's important to schedule such time, and set deadlines to avoid the tendency to let things slide, adds executive coach Karole Sutherland, president of Sutherland Consulting Group in Vancouver.

She recommends booking uninterrupted time for yourself in your daily agenda, and committing to meeting at least one goal a day. These could be things you have been meaning to do but have put off earlier in the year because other things took priority, she says.

The goals could be as uncomplicated as clearing out and organizing e-mail files or reading a career advice book, but achieving them will pay dividends, she says.

For instance, many career and leadership books ask you to sit down and do exercises to help assess your skills and set goals, she notes. Any other time of year, you might be tempted to skip the self-evaluations, but that means giving up an opportunity to gain insights and develop strategies that you can put to use in your career, Ms. Sutherland says.

"Just being in action, having things to do, and taking small steps to achieve them will keep your brain cells firing and give you a sense of momentum," Ms. Sutherland says.

Take advantage, too, of the weather to get outside the office, suggests Julia James, principal of Julia James Life Coaching in Vancouver. Even taking a lunchtime walk can

So Mr. Buchanan is doing everything he can to stay alert and attuned - and prepared to move into the fall in mental fighting form.

It's a problem many others face in the summer slowdown - and career experts say that you'd be wise to do whatever you can to snap out of it.

"If you think you can goof off now and gear up in the fall, you'll just end up frittering away weeks that could be the most valuable career development time of the year," warns Katie Bennett, principal of Double Black Diamond Coaching in Vancouver.

With so many people away, the phones are quiet, the appointment books are empty and e-mails drop to a fraction of normal. But that gives you opportunity to put downtime to good use to develop new ideas, set goals, network and lay the groundwork for projects you really want to do in the fall, Ms. Bennett says.

"By putting your name out there when others are not, you will get more visibility and have a better likelihood of getting what you want," Ms. Bennett says.

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give you a fresh perspective and stimulate new thinking, she says.

She recommends planning a "mini-retreat" to a park or beach for a morning or afternoon to reflect on your career goals and steps you should be taking in the fall to improve your effectiveness.

This is also a time in which co-workers and clients will be at loose ends, so take advantage of their availability, she notes.

"If you want to have a conversation with someone about career development or to just catch up, invite them out for lunch on a patio or for a round of golf. They will probably have the time they might not have in the fall to take you up on it," she says.

Look ahead, too, at opportunities to get a head start on the competition for the fall, suggests Toronto-based career coach Nina Spencer, president of Nina Spencer & Associates.

E-mail volume can fall by as much as two-thirds in August, so those that remain are more likely to get read and responded to by people who are busy multitasking the rest of the year, Ms. Spencer says.

Even if people you want to contact are on vacation, remember that their calendars for September and October are still wide open, so set a fall appointment now, she suggests. You'll already have your foot in the door when those who have coasted finally get back to business.

This is also a good time to set up development opportunities for yourself before your fall calendar begins to fill up, Ms. Spencer adds.

Check the websites of associations in your profession for meetings and seminars you would like to attend. If you need authorization, planning in advance will allow you to create a pitch for your boss and get your name in the queue ahead of others.

There is an added bonus to staying busy and visible in the current uncertain job market, Ms. Spencer says.

"If everyone else is goofing off and you are the one who looks engaged and focused, you are the one who will stand out as someone who takes the job seriously," she says.

"That will have the boss thinking, 'if we are going to lay off someone we don't want to lose that one.' "

If you are the boss, take advantage of the more relaxed atmosphere to have informal discussions with employees to hear their goals and concerns and take the pulse of satisfaction with your leadership, Ms. Spencer says.

The conversations don't need to be formalized, just a chat about how things are going. Questions such as "how are you liking your work?" and "what can I do to help you?" will give you a clearer idea of upcoming priorities for your management, she says.

And leaders should take the opportunity to ask the same questions of themselves, Ms. Spencer adds.

"Think about what you would praise or criticize if you were a client [or employee] of your organization. How you are perceived by others is something that is easy to lose sight of when business are hectic."

Mr. Buchanan is focusing on such issues as part of his summer slump-fighting strategy.

He blocks a couple of hours of uninterrupted time for development each day. "I take a pad of paper to write down potential new ideas and clients. Then I get on the phone to present these ideas."

As a team-building event for those who are on the job this month, he organized a barbecue with a guest chef to give a cooking class.

Mr. Buchanan is also taking advantage of the quiet time to get out of the office for a daily two-hour run to train for a fall marathon. "I find I get some of my best ideas when I'm out running,"

As soon as he gets back in the office after a run, he files his mental notes on his BlackBerry, and reviews the list every morning for things he can achieve immediately.

A couple of the ideas he got by doing this last August turned into new business.

"That's an ego boost, it keeps my creative energy flowing and it's good for the business," Mr. Buchanan says.

"I could be taking it easy, but I find I feel happier if I work on keeping my focus."

Brain boosters

Want to avoid brain meltdown? Here are ideas from career coach Nina Spencer for activities to help keep you focused for the rest of the summer:

Connect with your network

Arrange lunches, golf or phone chats with industry contacts you haven't seen in a while.

Plan enrichment

Investigate professional development opportunities coming up in the fall. Prepare a pitch to management on why you should be attending.

Find a new challenge

Create or join a short-term project you are enthusiastic about.

Catch up with the team

Be gregarious - people will have more time for informal discussions of ideas and suggestions.

Get physical

Commit or recommit to physical fitness, either by scheduling time at the gym or an outdoor walk or run. Use this as thinking time.

Clean house

Clearing the accumulated clutter from your work area, computer and filing cabinet gives a sense of accomplishment and should make you more efficient.

Do something silly

Organize a Friday barbecue or ice cream celebration in the office as a last hurrah to summer.

Do a team-building getaway

Invite co-workers to an outdoor lunch or go to a movie together.

Update your résumé

Even if you're not anticipating going on a job hunt, polishing up your CV will get you ready to apply for internal postings should they arise.


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