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Career Journal: The Jungle ---- By Erin White

THE WEEK BETWEEN Christmas and New Year's is a slow one at hospital executive Elizabeth Dever's office. But she has big plans. Ms. Dever, who is director of public relations and volunteers at the Shriners Hospital for Children in Los Angeles, intends to spend that week organizing her work space and her thoughts for the new year. She already has started a big desk cleanup and a filing-system overhaul. And she intends to map out priorities and projects for next year.

"December for me gets to be a little less busy, but then it starts back up in January," says Ms. Dever. "I thought, 'It's going to be the new year coming up very soon. If I'm going to do this, now is the time.'"

Many workers make a New Year's resolution to get organized. But people often don't take advantage of what workplace consultants say is one of the best times to organize yourself both physically and mentally: the lull between Christmas and New Year's next week. If you're in the office, chances are that fewer colleagues are around to distract you, the phones all but stop ringing and your short-term deadlines ease. You might even find yourself refreshingly bored.

It's the ideal time to step back, clean house and focus on what you want to accomplish next year.

"It's sort of a reflective time: What have I accomplished this year and what do I want to accomplish next year, and how to set that up?" says Marilyn Crouch, who runs Avenues to Organization, a professional organizing service in Redondo Beach, Calif. "It's quiet. I know in the corporate environment and in an office, it's really hard to find that time." She helped Ms. Dever kick-start her organization project.

Ms. Crouch tells clients that getting their work spaces organized is an important way to keep their thoughts organized, and in turn, to manage their time better. "Time that people invest in organizing really is time saved, not time wasted," she says. "How easy is it to lose an hour looking for that phone message, looking for that file, trying to find something in your files? It happens all the time."

Lynne Gilberg, a professional organizer in Los Angeles, passes along some of the organizing tricks she developed before she started her firm. When she worked as a book editor, for instance, she set up her desk to manage multiple book projects at different stages in development. She gave each book its own space on her shelves and created a master calendar with all the books' deadlines.

To mark deadlines for each project, Ms. Gilberg recommends using different colors. She included deadlines for the people with whom she worked, to remind her to tell colleagues about their impending deadlines. "If you let the people who are producing work for you get behind, that puts you behind," she says.

Ms. Gilberg started with the ultimate deadline for a project and worked backward, breaking down the effort into lots of smaller deadlines. She marked down when the writer had to deliver a chapter, and when the photographer had to finish shooting. She recommends overestimating the amount of time you'll need to do something. "It always takes longer, probably 30% longer, than you think it will," she says.

Create a "hot file," containing things you need to deal with immediately, Ms. Gilberg recommends. It could include a list of phone calls you have to make, a memo you have to act on within a few days or a notice of a coming meeting. Besides convenience, a hot file forces you to prioritize because you have to select which things will be included. "You might have a pile of 30 things that seem to be really urgent," she says. "You have to pick out the three or four or five and get them in front of [you], and put the rest aside and get them out of your head."

It's important to throw papers out or at least archive them regularly. Ms. Crouch tells clients to put a check mark on a file every time they use it. After six months, they should look through their files. If something has few or no marks, it should probably be tucked away in an archive file rather than mixed in with active projects.

When Ms. Dever started to clean out her files, she filled three large recycling bins in one day. The problem: When she started her job nine years ago, she inherited files from her predecessor that she hadn't sorted through. Nor had Ms. Dever created a comprehensive filing system of her own.

After she purged unnecessary papers -- original copies of articles published years earlier in her monthly hospital newsletter, for example -- Ms. Dever started organizing by grouping similar things. Now all her files on donors are together, as are her files on current projects. She plans to finish her overhaul during the week after Christmas. But the cleanup has already helped her manage her time better. "I was constantly finding myself saying, 'Where did I put that file?'" she says. "When you have a clear desk, you can just come in in the morning and pull out the file you're working on and feel like you're in control."

With her desk in order, Ms. Dever says she also can focus better on goals for next year. During the last week of December, she'll spend time thinking about how to recruit new patients to the hospital. She'll brainstorm about how to make more people aware of Shriners services; the hospital uses donor money to provide care free of charge. She'll also start planning the annual donor-appreciation dinner to be held in October. "Having a clean space to work on is going to help me organize not only my thoughts but the different projects I'm working on," Ms. Dever says.