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# **Getting a Life**

**Understanding the downshifting phenomenon  
in Australia**

Christie Breakspear

Clive Hamilton

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## Summary

In 2003 the Australia Institute published the results of a survey which showed that nearly a quarter of Australian adults have downshifted, that is, they have made a voluntary decision to change their lives in ways that reduce their incomes and spending (other than retirement). Downshifting is not confined to middle-aged people who are financially secure and can take the risk; the practice is spread across age groups, family types and income levels (except at the lowest level).

The survey found that downshifter adopt a number of strategies: they either reduce their hours of work, change to a lower paying job, change careers or stop work altogether. They make the change in order to spend more time with their families, to find personal fulfilment, to lead a more balanced life or to look after their health.

While widely reported and debated, the earlier study prompted as many questions as it answered. The present study has been designed to answer many of them. We have explored in detail the life changes and attitudes of 20 downshifters by way of extensive interviews. While those selected are diverse in age, gender, location and type of 'story', they are in some respects atypical of the quarter of the population that have downshifted. They tend to be better educated than the average downshifter and to have had professional jobs. But while their life changes are more vivid they nevertheless reflect the concerns and pressures of all downshifters. The in-depth interviews were augmented by four focus groups held across the country. More typical of the Australian population, the focus groups included people skeptical about downshifting.

### *Why they do it*

It was apparent from the focus groups that there are powerful forces discouraging people from downshifting. 'Fear and anxiety' were mentioned immediately, with fear about financial security a dominant factor. Many parents feel a strong obligation to provide financially as much as they can for their children's futures, including the cost of education. Some of those skeptical about downshifting say they see it as a selfish act.

Typically, downshifters change their lives for a combination of reasons. Four main ones have been identified in this study. The first is a desire for a more balanced life. Around half of the interviewees emphasised that they had had enough of the stress of trying to juggle competing demands. Rather than seeing downshifting as selfish, many believe that neglecting children in favour of long hours at work is self-centred.

The second reason is a clash between personal values and those of the workplace. Many react against managerial pressures, unbridled profit-seeking and the devotion of their energy to something they do not believe in. Some downshifters leave prestigious jobs in the law, banking and business to work in the non-profit sector.

The third reason, related to the first two, is the search for a more fulfilling life. As one interviewee put it, they want congruence between what they do in the world and what they are in themselves. This is usually the result of a slow realisation over several years.

The final reason for downshifting is ill health, often the result of the accumulation of stress over time. For some, health failure is a sudden and compelling reason for a life change. For others, downshifting takes an act of courage to overcome the fears and social sanctions that accompany the decision to reject society's preoccupation with money.

### *How they change*

Downshiffters often stress that they are not dropping out of society but living in society in a new way. The 20 interviewees mostly exchanged high-pressure positions in the professions, business or public service for lower-paying jobs in the non-profit sector. Some started their own businesses. Nearly all experienced large declines in income, often to half or a quarter of previous earnings.

Despite the variety of circumstances, when asked what they do without, the responses of our interviewees were remarkably uniform. All participants said they eat out at restaurants much less frequently and spend less when they do. Almost all said they have given up costly holidays and many said they saved substantial sums because they no longer have to buy expensive clothes for work.

Downshiffters develop a wholly different approach to spending and money. They plan more carefully, avoid unnecessary trips to the shops and eschew the symbols of status. At the same time they report that they are much less preoccupied with money than before the life change. The pattern of daily life also changes markedly once they have recaptured control over their time. They enjoy less rigidly ordered lives and many report that they spend more time out of doors engaged in healthy physical activity.

### *How others react*

Most downshiffters report that the reactions of family and friends are strong and often contradictory. They are frequently told that they must be 'mad' to give up opulent lifestyles, abandon promising careers and subject themselves to financial risk. We have identified what may be dubbed the Deferred Happiness Syndrome, the widespread propensity for people to persist stoically in unhappy and stressful occupations while convincing themselves that they will be in a position to live happily at some later time. Downshifting challenges this belief.

While downshiffters often meet skepticism and even hostility, their friends and colleagues frequently express curiosity and envy. Some say they have been 'inspired' by friends who have downshifted. Many downshiffters comment that their decision to change has separated their true friends from the others. They inevitably drift away from the latter, and their old work colleagues, because they no longer share interests and their decision often exposes fundamental differences in values. These value differences can give rise to awkward conversations in which downshiffters are sometimes accused of being superior. In the face of these mixed and confused reactions, downshiffters themselves appear to remain remarkably secure in their decisions.

Most downshiffters in our study reported that they experienced a loss of status. But they appear to have prepared themselves psychologically for this change in the way society

views them. The new values they manifest imply that conventional perceptions of social standing mean much less to them. Some find new forms of status in the unpaid work they do in the community or in their new occupations.

### *Reflections on the experience*

Downshiffters often report that they have some concerns about their financial situation, including provision for retirement. But given the large income reductions they experience, their worries are surprisingly mild and usually decline over time, a fact that reflects the changed attitude to money that is a constant of the downshifting experience.

Some downshiffters have difficulty freeing themselves from the compulsion to work relentlessly and they sometimes feel guilty for relaxing and enjoying simple pleasures. They report that it takes time to become habituated to a slower pace of life and even to adjust to new sleeping patterns. Others miss the social interaction of their former workplaces and seek substitutes through new jobs and community activities and the renewal of old friendships.

When asked about the benefits of downshifting, respondents immediately cite a new sense of personal freedom and rediscovery of the joy of living. They stress the satisfaction they derive from regaining control over their lives. None had any regrets, except perhaps for the years lost before they made the change. But they would not recommend downshifting to everyone, believing that one has to be fully ready for the change.

The focus groups revealed that Australians in their forties and fifties are preoccupied with retirement, frequently expressing anxiety about whether they will have enough money to live comfortably. A sharp difference in attitudes to retirement emerged between downshiffters and others. The obsessive concern with saving for retirement seems to dissolve with the downshifting decision, and those who have made the change seem perplexed by the fixation of others with their superannuation accounts. This is partly because downshiffters are simply less interested in pecuniary affairs and partly because they have shown themselves to be willing to take risks. They tend to welcome the uncertainty of life as an antidote to the stultifying effects of conforming to social expectations.

### *What it means*

The downshifting phenomenon represents much more than the decisions of scattered individuals to change their life priorities. Because it requires downshiffters to reject powerful social pressures, it is a social force with far-reaching political implications. From this study it is clear that both downshiffters and others recognise that making the change takes an act of courage. In a society that celebrates individual choice this is, in itself, curious. When downshifting has become so widespread that it is no longer seen to be an act of defiance, then modern consumer society will have demonstrably undergone a radical change.



## 1. Questioning downshifting

### 1.1 Genesis of the study

Almost a quarter of Australian adults are downshiffters, that is, they have made a voluntary decision to change their lives in ways that mean they earn and spend less money. Downshiffters are a diverse group; there are as many in their thirties as in their forties or fifties; they are just as likely to be parents as childless, blue collar as white collar; and there are as many women as men making the change. Perhaps most surprisingly, the phenomenon is not confined to wealthy households that have achieved financial security but is evident also among people on moderate and even low incomes.

We know all of this as a result of the comprehensive national survey of downshiffters published by The Australia Institute in January 2003 (Hamilton and Mail 2003), a report that attracted intense interest from the media and provoked debate around the country. Although Australians had been practising downshifting for years, never before in this country had the phenomenon been named, and the subsequent debate made downshiffters aware that their private decisions reflected a far-reaching social change.<sup>1</sup>

The broad motivations and types of changes undertaken by downshiffters revealed by the 2003 research are summarized in section 1.3, but the earlier study prompted many questions about the phenomenon which could not be answered with confidence. What leads downshiffters to make the change? How long does it take to make the break? What do they actually do and how do they feel at the time? Do they find it easy to make the change or is it fraught with difficulties? What is it like to live on half or a third of your previous income? What do they go without? How do their friends and family react to their decision to downshift? Do they have any regrets?

Some intimations of the answers to these questions can be gleaned from the six case studies reported by Hamilton and Mail (2003) and from other studies, notably that of Tan (2000). The present study has been carried out to answer these questions more fully by exploring in detail the life changes embarked upon by a group of downshiffters and, to enrich this understanding further, by investigating the attitudes of others to downshifting and the broader social pressures that lead to it. The research relies upon the results of in-depth interviews with 20 downshiffters and four focus groups, as described in section 1.2.

Exploring the downshifting phenomenon can tell us a great deal about how Australian society has been changing over recent years. While downshiffters as a group are in some important respects atypical – they have, after all, contravened some powerful social norms – the scale of the phenomenon suggests that they are responding to some powerful social forces, ones that are affecting large numbers of Australians in profound ways. At one level, downshifting represents a challenge to the materialism,

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<sup>1</sup> A similar study of downshifting in the United Kingdom has also been carried out by The Australia Institute (Hamilton, 2003b). Schor (1998) discusses the phenomenon in the USA.

money-hunger and relentless pressure to succeed in socially sanctioned ways that many see intensifying in Australian society.

Many who have made the life change express discomfort with the term 'downshifting'.<sup>2</sup> They often say that they do not see themselves as moving 'down' in any sense, except that of money income. For them, the financial dimension of life has become much less important so they do not like to be described in terms of the aspect of their lives that they have shifted away from. They do not see themselves as being in decline in any way; quite the opposite, they typically see themselves as flourishing, moving into a new mode of existence in which long-suppressed aspects of themselves and their lives expand and grow. So while their incomes may have shifted down, everything else has shifted up. It seems that the discomfort arises from the fact that the description keeps them tied to a situation that they have rejected. Despite these legitimate reservations, the authors of this study have decided to persist with the term 'downshifting' as it is well-established in both academic literature and common parlance in the USA and Europe. However, we recognise that the downshifting phenomenon itself highlights the one-dimensional way in which people are judged in Australian society.

## 1.2 The research method

The information used in this study was generated by in-depth interviews with 20 people identifying as downshifters and four focus groups consisting of people with a broad mix of opinions and lifestyles. A few were downshifters.

The 20 interviewees were selected by the Snowball Sampling method. This method, frequently used in research requiring small numbers of subjects for intensive interviewing, is described as follows.

A method whereby interview subjects for a statistical study are obtained from subjects already interviewed from that study. ... Those subjects first contacted are asked to name acquaintances, who are then approached, interviewed, and asked for additional names. In this way, a sufficient number of subjects can be accumulated to give a study adequate power.<sup>3</sup>

The interviewees were identified initially through word of mouth but then by referral to others by those already interviewed. The drawback to this method is that a biased sample will be chosen. Efforts were therefore made to ensure that those in the group of 20 were diverse in age, location, gender and type of 'story'. Some basic data are shown in Table 1.

It should be pointed out that the sample remains unrepresentative of all downshifters in at least two respects. Firstly, the downshifters we have interviewed tend to be those who have broken more sharply with their previous lives. Rather than reducing their hours of work, for example, they have changed careers, often leaving high-status employment for markedly different employment or no paid employment.

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<sup>2</sup> There is also a common linguistic confusion with 'downsizing'.

<sup>3</sup> Medical Dictionary Search Engine, <http://www.books.md/S/dic/snowballsampling.php> 26/01/04

**Table 1 Characteristics of the interviewees**

	Name <sup>a</sup>	Sex	Age	Location <sup>b</sup>	Occupation before the change
1	Alistair	M	27	Sydney	Lawyer
2	Andrea	F	46	Rural NSW	Own business (IT consultancy)
3	Brian	M	50	Canberra	Own business (training)
4	Connor	M	32	Melbourne	Lawyer
5	Craig	M	44	Canberra	Television producer
6	Damien	M	35	Sydney	Accountant
7	David	M	59	Sydney	Senior manager
8	Fiona	F	52	Sydney	Own business
9	Franco	M	29	Sydney	Banker
10	Jane	F	44	Canberra	Public servant
11	Leah	F	50	Canberra	Curator
12	Mason	M	59	Canberra	Public servant
13	Patrick	M	52	Rural NSW	Policy adviser
14	Paul	M	44	Sydney	Journalist
15	Rachel	F	52	Sydney	Economist
16	Sasha	F	35	Sydney	Medical professional
17	Simon	M	29	Sydney	Lawyer
18	Timothy	M	33	Melbourne	Marketing manager
19	Trish	F	30	Canberra	Statistician
20	Zelda	F	28	Rural NSW	Social worker

Notes:

a. All names and certain other inessential details of the interviewees have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

b. Current residential location, i.e. after downshifting.

Secondly, and related to the first, they tend to have downshifted from higher incomes than the ‘average’ downshifter. While the data reported in the next section indicate that downshifters are drawn from across the income spectrum, except at the lowest levels, those in the sample interviewed for this study mostly had incomes ranging from \$65,000 to \$100,000 or more before they made the change.

It is normal in this sort of qualitative research to choose interviewees who can best explicate the phenomenon under investigation. Because they have made far-reaching changes to their lives, the interviewees tend to have reflected more deeply on their new circumstances and the reasons for it. Rather than being outliers they can explain more clearly what the pressures are on all downshifters. However, care must be exercised in extrapolating the themes identified from these interviews to downshifters in general.

The participants in the focus groups were drawn from the general community. The focus groups were held in Gosford (NSW), Hobart, Canberra and Melbourne and included 41 people in total. The first three groups were convened by the marketing firm Terry Aulich & Co from that company’s database, and the fourth (in Melbourne) was convened by inviting volunteers from among the 550 members of The Australia Institute. While the first three groups were a cross-section of the local communities, the fourth was comprised mainly of self-identified downshifters. The focus group discussions were designed to elicit broader community perspectives on the downshifting phenomenon and the sorts of social and personal pressures that appear to be related to it. They included people who are critical of downshifting.

### **1.3 What do we know about downshifting in Australia?**

For their study, Hamilton and Mail (2003) commissioned Newspoll to conduct a national survey to determine the extent and nature of downshifting in Australia. It was the first time systematic information had been gathered on this group of Australians. Downshifters were identified initially by an affirmative answer to the following question:

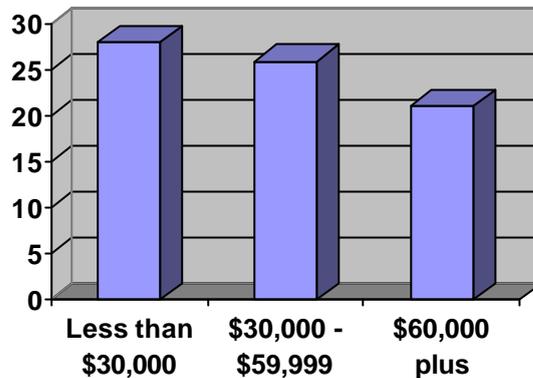
In the last ten years have you *voluntarily* made a long-term change in your lifestyle, other than planned retirement, which has resulted in you earning less money?

Using a narrow definition, 23 per cent of Australian adults aged 30-59 had downshifted over the previous 10 years. The proportion rises to over 30 per cent if those returning to study or setting up their own businesses are included. Men and women, people in their thirties, forties and fifties, and families with and without children are just as likely to make the life change.

Contrary to a widely held view, downshifters are as likely to be blue-collar workers as white-collar workers. Proportionally, there are more downshifters on low incomes (less than \$30,000) than on high incomes (over \$60,000) (Figure 1), although in absolute terms there are more high-income downshifters than low-income ones, even after the change. (The incomes in Figure 1 are those reported after the downshift, so some of those now on low incomes would have been on high incomes.)

Reducing working hours is the most popular way to downshift but changing to a lower-paying job, stopping paid work and changing careers are also common. Women are more likely to stop paid work and men are more likely to change careers while downshifter with children are more likely to reduce their hours of work or stop paid work altogether.

**Figure 1 Proportion of each income group who are downshifters (%)**



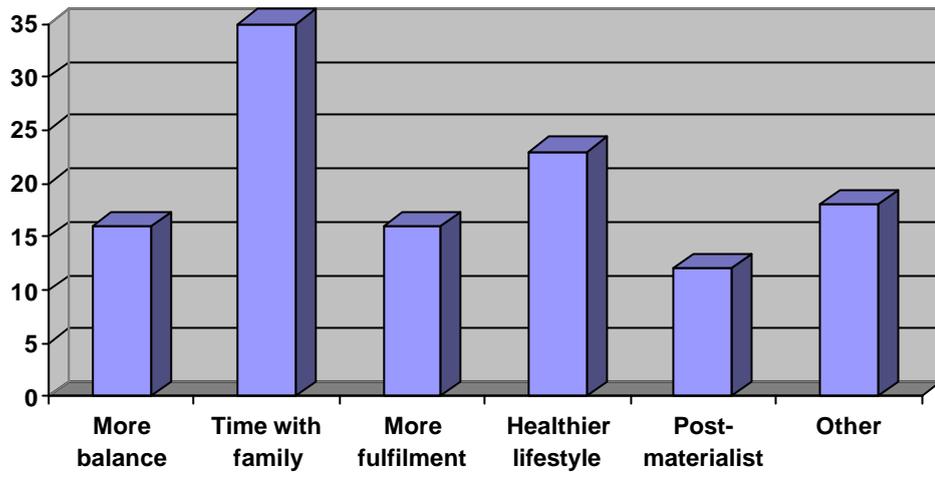
Source: Hamilton and Mail (2003)

The most important reason given for downshifting is to spend more time with family. A desire for a healthier lifestyle, more personal fulfilment and a more balanced lifestyle are also important (Figure 2). Post-materialist reasons – i.e. less materialistic and more environmentally friendly lifestyles – are nominated by few downshifters as their primary motivation, although for many it is one of several reasons for making the change. However, any decision to downshift in search of a more balanced life with less emphasis on money reflects a post-materialist value system.

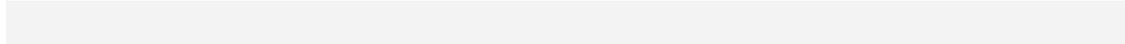
Householders with children are much more likely to downshift in pursuit of more time with their families, while those without children are much more likely to be motivated by the desire for more balanced and healthier lives. While all income groups stress more time with family, high-income downshifters are much more likely to mention the desire for personal fulfilment, and those on low incomes are more likely to stress a healthier lifestyle.

The research reported by Hamilton and Mail (2003) uncovered a large and invisible class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism and the pre-occupations of the ‘aspirational voter’. While diverse in many respects, they agree that an excessive pursuit of money and materialism comes at a substantial cost to their own lives and to those of their families.

**Figure 2 Why Australians downshift (%)**



Source: Hamilton and Mail (2003)



## 2. What leads to the change?

### 2.1 The decision context

Studies in Australia and abroad have uncovered several primary motivations for downshifting. Although people who downshift are rarely motivated by a single factor, their motives can be divided into personal reasons and those based on principle. A dominant reason for downshifting is the desire to gain more fulfilment from life (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Saltzman, 1991). While various factors can underpin a lack of fulfilment, it is commonly centered on the increasing dominance of work and career over all other life goals, especially relationships with family and friends (Drake 2000). The desire to spend more time with family is commonly cited as a strong motive for many downshifters with children. Tan has identified technological change and growing emphasis on work, in addition to changes in both the economy and organizational structures, as contributors to career downshifting (Tan 2000 pp. 17-19). Changes in the workplace in the 1990s, including overwork and increased pressure, appear to have intensified the attraction of downshifting for reasons of family and personal fulfilment.

Ill-health can also be a motivating factor whether affecting the downshifter or someone close to them. It is a common theme in popular culture to associate severe and near-fatal illness with 'life changes'. Daniela Guidera, the head of Monash University's Stress Management and Counselling Clinic, argues that an individual's life satisfaction is greatly affected by workplace stress and that, among executives, a breakdown in health is often the only factor that will cause them to reassess their working lives (cited by Shiel 1999).

For some downshifters the decision follows a particular event that causes them to reappraise their priorities in life. Apart from illness, the event may be an accident such as a house fire, bankruptcy, the death of a family member, friend or close colleague, the breakdown of a marriage or a spiritual experience. Exposure to radically different cultures and lifestyles through overseas travel can also trigger a fundamental questioning of one's life course and priorities.

For others, the decision to downshift results from a long process of questioning the state of the world and their own place in it. Gross inequality and dire poverty – especially at a global level – cause some people to query their affluent and self-centred lifestyles. Concern for the global environment is also a motivational factor especially in the USA and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Some individuals have a growing belief that the environment is in a precarious state and feel that they can at least reduce their responsibility by treading more lightly on the Earth through simple living and minimising waste.

While the decision to downshift sometimes follows a dramatic event or sudden realisation, most downshifters reach their decision slowly and the reasons are rather prosaic. The actual process of life change may not be an overnight switch from one lifestyle to another but a more gradual winding back of working time, income and

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<sup>4</sup> See Schor (1998), Hamilton (2003b) and the case studies in Hamilton and Mail (2003).

consumption. Tan's respondents generally took 1-5 years to finally make the change (Tan 2000, p. 159).

## 2.2 Four main reasons

Every downshifter's narrative is different, but certain themes emerge strongly in the stories told by our 20 interviewees and in the focus group discussions. When asked about the circumstances in their lives that led to making the decision to downshift, downshifters emphasized four principal reasons (discussed in turn in the next four sections). These are: the desire to have a more balanced life; a clash between personal values and those of their workplaces; a quest for personal fulfilment; and health concerns. Typically, the interviewees made the decision for a combination of these reasons and for most it was a considered and gradual process involving a complex of factors. None nominated a single reason only for their decision.

In contrast to these pressures in favour of downshifting, it was apparent from the focus group discussions that several factors make the decision to change more difficult. Many people are preoccupied with providing for their children to give them a head start in life in ways that are expensive. This factor may work at a subtle level as occurs when parents feel they want their children to be able to match their peers in living standards and access to 'stuff' (see the analysis by Pocock and Clarke 2004). But more obvious factors also come into play. Many parents feel obliged to work long and hard in order to afford private schooling and to put their children through university without a HECS debt at the end. In some cases, a shared responsibility for children from previous marriages acts as a constraint. A couple at the Canberra focus group talked of the cost of maintaining three families - each had been married before - and the pressure on them to work harder. 'My assets have been divided twice due to separation', said the male. Their combined income would put them in the top ten per cent of Australian households.

The sense of responsibility to children, and sometimes other family members, is often enough to cause prospective downshifters to subjugate their own needs. Others who have not made a change describe downshifting as a 'selfish' act. For them the decision is seen as one taken for one's own sake, to give oneself an easier life. Those downshifters with children never see it in these terms; they see themselves as giving more to their families, but measure the gift in terms of time and devotion.

Nevertheless, one of the dominant themes to emerge from the focus groups was the heightened level of financial insecurity felt by many people, especially those in their forties and fifties, often related to perceptions of retirement, discussed later. This is odd given that Australians are richer than they have ever been and we have had at least a decade of sustained economic growth. But when asked why people do not downshift, many focus group participants replied immediately that it was 'fear' or 'fear and anxiety'. Several admitted that they could downshift if they wanted to but that the prospect of such a change was too scary. As this suggests, those who do make the change frequently have to exercise considerable courage, and this explains why the change often comes only after some years of deliberation and may be precipitated by a sudden, unpleasant change in circumstances, such as a new boss, ill-health or a business in difficulty.

### 2.3 More balance

Nine interviewees nominated the difficulty of constantly juggling life's competing demands and the stresses that this generated in their personal lives as a major reason for making the change. Some indicated the relentless pressure to 'get it all done', invariably associated with combining work and family roles. The desire to spend more time with children is a particularly strong motive. Paul (44) worked very long hours in television in Sydney and was often overseas for weeks at a time. When his first child was born he realised the incompatibility of his job with his desire to spend at least some time with his family.

With the birth of our first child I realised there was much more to life than just working non-stop. But the job demanded being available 24 hours a day seven days a week. ... I could see colleagues' marriages breaking up. I didn't want this to be me. So I made the decision not to apply for positions like these again.

Craig (44), also in the media industry, echoed Paul's experience of the conflict between work and family commitments. Marriage and parenthood led him to resign from television work in order to pursue a more balanced life as a chiropractor.

Leah (50) asked for more flexible hours at the art gallery where she worked as a curator to enable her to care for her two young children. But she was refused.

These policies were only rhetoric and I couldn't negotiate a flexible work arrangement with them and keep my job... Their so called 'family-friendly' approach was illustrated when I had to bring my children in to a staff meeting called unexpectedly only to be told children were not allowed in the staff room. So after 18 years of working there I'd had enough. Because of this and other reasons I decided to leave.

A particularly poignant story of the incompatibility between work and family was related to one of the authors by a young man who worked a 12-14 hour day in a large corporation in the finance sector. At a meeting with a number of his senior colleagues he broke down, lamenting that in the ten months since the birth of his child he had not *once* seen him awake.

While some of the interviewees equated a more balanced life with being able to spend more time with their families, others wanted more time to pursue personal interests or just to slow down and live a less frenetic lifestyle. For Zelda (28) living in a more measured way entailed leaving Sydney for a town near the north coast of NSW.

It took me about six months to wind down and slow down. Now we live life more slowly; there is time to make things, grow things and savour things. It was absolutely the right decision not just because there's more time for things and each other. Luke and I would never have been able to afford a house in Sydney and didn't really want our children to grow up in such a rushed and materialistic environment.

When Damien (35) moved from working very long hours in the corporate sector to a job in the charity sector he was seeking more balance.

I have time to pursue things that I believe in and that I'm passionate about as part of my day-to-day job, as opposed to being something that I had to squeeze in as part of my work life in the corporate sector, when there was never any time. Life is much more manageable now. For example, I now have time for reading and professional development and, most importantly, my children.

Simon (29) from Sydney worked as a corporate lawyer for three years in a large legal firm. He was on a very high salary but not content with his life.

I spent too much time at work, not enough time doing things that I wanted to do. ... A typical day for me was 8.30 to 6.30, which was considered very short. I avoided working on weekends religiously, but most others worked three out of four weekends. But after a couple of years, it was becoming clear that if I didn't want to take the next step up, and I didn't, or increase my commitment to earn more, it was going to become difficult.

## 2.4 Clash of values

The second theme to emerge from the interviews was the clash between the personal values of the downshifters and those of their workplaces. Changes in workplace culture, management practices and the intensification of work over recent years were nominated by eight of the interviewees as being at the heart of their decisions to downshift. Downsizing, outsourcing, longer work hours and the faster pace of work have all put more pressure on people and contributed to a lower quality of life. This theme also emerged in the focus groups, with one refugee from big business observing: 'I see the corporate world as carnivorous. The pecking order is unhealthy and quite savage. I found it morally bankrupt.' Another said that he got out because 'the moral structure of the business was wrong'. Others said they could no longer tolerate incessant demands to 'do the deals', 'bring in the business' and increase 'billable hours'. Another said: 'It is easy to lose consciousness of decisions, to lose the ability to choose. You become complicit in the culture'.

This sense of loss of control over one's life was one of the most consistent themes to emerge in the study. The more people felt they had lost control, and the more serious the personal and moral consequences, the more likely they were to move into radically different kinds of jobs in areas such as children's welfare, the environment and charities.

For example, David (59) worked in Sydney as a senior manager for a large multinational corporation for many years until he downshifted at the end of 2000. He explained the circumstances of his working life at the time and the incongruity between his personal values and those of the corporation.

The company was going through a horror stretch which they described as restructuring or 'right sizing', but this actually meant massive job losses. It was not a pleasant place to be, especially as I had a key role in the process of getting rid of people. But on a personal level, I was sick of the hours (at least 12 hours a day), sick of the traffic and especially turned off by the new culture and values of the company. They brought in the 'head-kickers' from overseas.

Like David, other interviewees said the reasons for their disenchantment went beyond the ill effects of the long-hours culture. They explained that the degree of conflict between their personal values and those espoused by their workplaces had reached the stage where they no longer wanted to continue in their positions. In several cases, jobs in banking, law and business were exchanged for ones in non-profit organisations with a focus on humanitarian and environmental issues.

Alistair (27) worked in a corporate law firm for a number of years but left for a very different job in the non-government sector.

I always knew it wasn't me, not my values. The general ethos of the firm which is about business and making money, these are not my goals, definitely not important to me. ... You see all those people who get to the top and you're turned off. When it comes down to it, it's a business, all about you billing the client and earning money, recording every six minutes and making money for the firm. This concept is inimical to my nature.

Similarly, Connor (32) left a highly paid job as a merchant banker to become a professional photographer because 'while I initially found the work stimulating, it soon became mundane and I just lost interest in making money. I was no longer driven to make money for the company'.

Franco (29), also a high flyer in the finance industry for over six years, made the decision to downshift and take up a job on a semi-voluntary basis in a developing country.

I found over time that it wasn't really money that motivated me and actually I didn't really care that much about it. This was quite a discovery as I had a degree in finance and was working in a bank. It took quite a while for my innate anti-materialism to become conscious. The only things that motivated me at work involved being intellectually challenged.

Rachel (52) a senior economist in the public service for many years, could no longer reconcile her values and beliefs with the policy direction of the government. She explained:

I was uncomfortable with the way the department was working. It was not because of long hours, but more about policymaking. People's professional training was not recognised or applied – we didn't have the scope to inform public policy. ... Mainstream economics prevailed and there was no scope for discussion or dissent. I was very dissatisfied. I was not proud of what I was doing.

Others just realised that they were in the wrong profession. Sasha (35), who became a medical professional largely to please her parents, understood how much she disliked it after just a few years in the job.

I realised fairly early on this work was wrong for me, but I didn't know what was right for me. I thought if I carried on, something miraculously would work out for me. But it never did.

She went on:

I remember it was at my boss's retirement party when I was just about to turn 30 and he had turned 60. I remember looking at him and thinking, 'My God, I can't do this for another 30 years. The things that I was feeling - the stress, the discontentment, the disgruntlement - he was still feeling at 60. ... I asked myself 'Do I really want to be in that position in 30 years time?', and I knew I didn't.

## 2.5 In search of fulfilment

A third theme to emerge was that many downshifters (eight of the 20 interviewees) make the change for what might be called existential reasons; they are seeking some form of inner contentment. Or, as one downshifter in a focus group said: 'I wanted congruence between what I do in the world and what I am in myself'. Invariably, the decision-making process is gradual, resulting from a great deal of reflection about why they felt unfulfilled in both their working and personal lives. The journey is often difficult, sometimes causing disappointment among family members, but in each case they found a way of living that brought greater self-acceptance and psychological well-being.

Franco (29), who downshifted from a highly paid job in corporate finance, thought a lot about the failure of material possessions to bring him any sense of fulfilment.

Once when I was negotiating with my boss about work, I realised I didn't want more money to motivate me. I was looking for more challenges, more responsibility, a certain type of work, and I was more than willing to sacrifice money for it. I worked this way for quite a few years and felt much better. I wasn't interested in the power politics and the money-making parts of work.

Another, a 59-year old senior public servant, felt unfulfilled for many years in both his work and personal life. After much searching, questioning and reflection he concluded that:

I no longer wanted to live in the milieu of high income, high expenditure, owning all sorts of things; of getting up in the morning to load yourself with the electronics and technology and getting out there and networking for whatever purpose ... and the long hours.

Zelda (28) initially experienced difficulty exchanging her busy city life of pubs and restaurants for the quiet, slower pace of country life. However, it gave her the opportunity to reflect on what made her happy in life. Drawing on her overseas travel experiences, she recalled a time when she was seriously ill in India:

I was in the hospital of a small village where I'd only been for a short time. However, every person in that village visited me, bringing gifts and offers of accommodation and hospitality when I was better. Most of these people were very poor, but so generous, thinking nothing of sharing whatever they had with me, a foreigner and stranger. And they were so happy, always smiling. It made me realise what I suspected in London, that you didn't need 'things' to make you happy.

Once she had left Sydney and settled gradually into a different, simpler way of living in a small, rural town, Zelda talked of how much happier she felt.

Living up here, I'm much more aware of the weather, of how significant droughts and floods are, how the garden is affected. I'll never forget the excitement of growing our own vegetables - picking, cooking and eating them. I now have time to 'smell the roses'.

Other interviewees echoed similar struggles to find a way of living that allowed more contentment and self-acceptance.

## 2.6 Health

Several interviewees nominated health reasons as the factor that stimulated them to make the change. In some cases, it was an accumulation of stress over time. One described the effect of long hours and pressure: 'I was losing weight, my hair was falling out, I wasn't sleeping. It was getting to the stage where it was really affecting my health and I knew I had to do something, that something had got to change'. In other cases, their health broke down suddenly. Andrea (46), who ran an IT consultancy with her husband, lived a life dominated by work as 'contract after contract rolled in'. There was little time for leisure, relaxation or even personal reflection. 'I dressed up in the corporate suits, went in there pretty aggressively, got the work done'. After eight years of living and working this way, Andrea suffered a breakdown.

There were many things that caused it. Work was getting more and more stressful, but an argument with my step-daughter threw me over the edge. I had to have treatment, somehow managed to finish the current contract and then we left for a holiday.

In some cases, poor working conditions had adverse health effects. Jane (44) worked long hours as a senior manager in policy development in the public service. A single parent with two young children, she never seemed to have enough time to do either job properly. 'I just felt my life was constantly on the run, never enough time for the kids, no time for myself'. Eventually, Jane developed chronic headaches and she took extended sick leave. It was while she was on leave that she had the opportunity to assess the state of her health and the way she was living.

I'd been feeling for some time that my life was too stressful and I wasn't getting much out of life. I had tried to do something about it, requested part-time work, five days a week until 3pm. But it didn't work, you just couldn't get out of the place by then. There was always so much to do. The headaches were getting worse. I don't know if it was because of the stress or being in front of a computer screen for so many hours a day. Probably both.

Jane's health deteriorated to the point where she went on workers' compensation, which provided a time to reflect on why her health had failed. Shortly afterwards, she decided to resign from her job and return to her original profession of nursing, but on a part-time basis.

Fiona (52) from Sydney experienced exhaustion and anxiety after years of supporting her partner in his own business. At the end of 2002 they decided to close down their business as both felt they desperately needed a change.

I felt an absolute stressed out mess, as if I'd lost my whole personality and self completely. ... We both wanted to do something different. Bruce wanted to work fewer hours and have less work stress. We'd paid off our house, our kids were grown up, so we felt we were in a position to live on less.

## 2.7 Overview

In contrast to these reasons for downshifting, powerful forces serve to dissuade people from making the change. The dominant one to emerge from our focus groups was 'fear', fear about financial security and about one's place in society. Many parents feel obligated to work as hard as they can to provide for their children's future, and the urge to provide for retirement dominated much of the discussion. Some of those skeptical about downshifting see it as selfish, while downshifter themselves see it as providing the capacity to give more to family and friends.

Typically, downshifter change their lives for a combination of reasons. Of the four main ones identified in this study, the first is a desire for a more balanced life. Around half of the interviewees emphasised that they had had enough of constantly trying to juggle competing demands and suffering the associated stress. The desire to spend more time with their children was a potent motive for some.

The second reason is a clash between personal values and those of the workplace. Many react against managerial pressures, unbridled profit-seeking and devoting their energy to something they do not believe in. Some downshifter leave prestigious jobs in the law, banking and business to work in the non-profit sector.

Related to the first two, the third reason given is the search for a more fulfilling life. As one downshifter put it, they want congruence between what they do in the world and what they are in themselves, usually the result of a slow realisation over several years.

The final reason for downshifting is ill health, often the result of the accumulation of stress over time. For some, health failure is a sudden and compelling reason for a life change. For others, downshifting takes an act of courage to overcome the fears and social sanctions that accompany the decision to reject society's preoccupation with money.

### 3. How do they change?

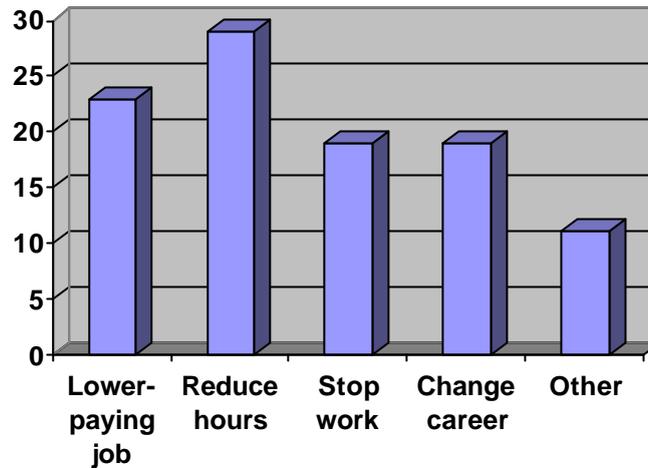
#### 3.1 What we already know

Although the downshifting experience is a uniquely individual one, research in Australia and overseas has identified certain patterns. Individuals who make the choice to downshift usually stress that they are not dropping out of society altogether. As one downshifter in a focus group put it: 'We are actually creating something new, not getting out'. They are changing their lifestyles to varying degrees because they are not happy with core aspects of their lives.

Consumption patterns and careers can undergo varying degrees of modification. In some of the books on downshifting, a change in an individual's patterns of consumption has been identified as a primary step in the downshifting process (e.g. Boyle 2003). After assessing how much they consume and how much they actually need, people can make a change in work and consumption patterns more easily. Other downshifters decide to cut down on earnings and then reassess areas of their lives such as career and consumption. The career professionals interviewed by Tan (2000) had shifted down from high-paying, high-stress jobs following dissatisfaction with their working and personal lives. The changes to patterns of work can take the form of reducing working hours, changing jobs entirely or doing unpaid volunteer or community work. Some single downshifters choose to withdraw from paid work and some couples choose to live on one income.

Downshifters sometimes move to less expensive areas or choose a smaller home or apartment. Others move to rural areas or the coast. A change in location can allow people to cut down on their spending considerably. A smaller house often means lower mortgage or rent. Moving out of the city can reduce living costs and take one away from shopping malls. A more radical style of downshifting is to move to communal housing, a trend that is popular in Denmark. Schwarz and Schwarz (1999) suggest that co-housing is increasingly popular in the USA, Australia and Canada.

Previous work has established that Australians adopt a variety of methods of downshifting. As Figure 3 indicates, reducing working hours is the most popular way to downshift but changing to a lower-paying job, stopping paid work and changing careers are also common. Women are more likely to stop paid work and men are more likely to change careers while downshifters with children are more likely to reduce their hours of work or stop paid work altogether. The interviewees in the present study are much more likely to have made shifts more radical than simply reducing hours. Most changed their careers, sometimes after a period of attempting to reduce their hours of work in their previous jobs. Frequently the change was from a high-pressure corporate environment to the non-profit sector or to their own businesses. Most of the interviewees reported large declines in income, often to half or a quarter of previous earnings with several mentioning current incomes in the range \$25,000 to \$35,000. Some also gave up various perquisites that went with their previous jobs, such as company cars and fringe benefits including, in one case, theatre tickets.

**Figure 3 How Australians downshift (%)**

Source: Hamilton and Mail (2003)

### 3.2 Consumption patterns

How do consumption patterns change? When asked what they do without, the responses of our interviewees were remarkably uniform. All responded immediately that they eat out less often and, when they do, they choose less expensive restaurants. Indeed, food features prominently in many discussions of new lifestyles. Most downshifters say that they spend more time cooking and enjoy doing so. Many say they are much more careful in the food they buy (and several take pleasure in growing their own vegetables). This is partly motivated by tighter budgets but also reflects a new emphasis on healthy eating.

Almost all of our downshifters said that they have given up expensive holidays, including holidays abroad. None expressed regret at this sacrifice with some saying they just take cheaper holiday options in Australia. On the other hand, some younger downshifters take the opportunity to use some of their freed up time to travel, especially to developing countries to experience life as it is lived by others.

Surprisingly, another frequently mentioned type of forgone consumption is spending on clothes needed for work, the corporate uniforms that many no longer require. Downshifters often report discarding their suits with some glee for they seem to symbolize the life they left behind. Andrea, whose income fell dramatically after she and her husband wound up their IT business, summed up many of these changes.

We feel better, we grow our own vegies, we cook more. I no longer spend \$1000 on each corporate outfit. We have fewer restaurant meals now, make our own beer, don't go on overseas trips anymore. We have a better, healthier lifestyle.

### 3.3 Approach to money

In addition to doing without these specific items of expenditure, many downshiffters adopt a wholly different approach to spending. While much less preoccupied with money, they are nevertheless more careful in how they dispose of what they have. One described himself and his partner as ‘aware buyers’ who are rarely tempted to purchase things they don’t need. Others avoid shopping centres except when necessary and are not tempted to spend their leisure time window shopping or engaged in retail therapy. Downshifting always involves some simplification of life as well as a shift in attitudes. Much of our spending is conditioned by status-seeking and the capacity of downshiffters to give up symbols of status such as corporate uniforms and company cars is a reflection of a deeper shift in their perceptions of how to measure their self-worth (Boyle 2003). (This is discussed in more detail in the next section.)

Those with children often talk about how their offspring adjusted to lower household incomes. Some seem to ‘protect’ their children from the changes either by keeping up spending on items specific to their children or postponing the decision until their children are well into their teens.<sup>5</sup> Others believe that there is more discretion than is commonly believed. Paul, who left the television industry at 44, said:

We basically set about minimising our expenditure, and that wasn’t that hard with kids. Strangely enough everyone thinks it costs a fortune. ... All of our friends were going to private hospitals and had private health insurance. ... I didn’t think there was anything wrong with the public system and we had our first baby at the local public hospital.

Paul walks his children to school each day, savings travel expenses and spending that extra time with them.

While some downshiffters take to their new financial circumstances quickly, others have difficulty adjusting. Mason, who resigned as a senior public servant at 59, said:

Adjusting my consumption to fit my income was pretty tough for the first six months. I had a lot of concerns about dipping into my savings and my bank balance was slowly disappearing. ... I then found that I had adjusted and got myself on to a different footing.

### 3.4 Recapturing time

For most downshiffters the dominant change in their lives involves taking control of their time and devoting it to more satisfying activities. This may mean more time with partners and children, particularly when children are young. Patrick, who left a high-pressure job as a ministerial adviser, said:

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<sup>5</sup> Pocock and Clarke (2004) have analysed children’s attitudes to money, material goods and time spent with their parents.

I took a break for a couple of years and spent most of the time catching up with old friends. I was very conscious that my small network of friends was maintained mainly through phone calls and email. I realised that some of them I hadn't spent time with in years. It was lovely.

Many report that they spend much more time out of doors engaged in healthy physical activity. Comments on how much healthier they feel are common; they feel fitter and more invigorated. Some report that the life change precipitated an instant lifting of mood and approach to life. Leah said she felt an enormous sense of relaxation once she downshifted.

A lot of bullshit just disappeared. It was like being in another world, and I couldn't understand how I had been in that environment for so long. I suddenly had a clear view.

Andrea felt similarly when asked how she felt.

A sense of freedom, just a sense of relief, a feeling which has got better and better. It's become easier with time to let go of all the worries, stressing about it, plotting and planning and scheming, writing all those lists about how to achieve.

It is common for downshifters to comment on the process of reordering the mind and discarding the preoccupation with imposing a structure on the day and measuring one's performance against it. Some also say it takes a long time to regain a physical equilibrium.

I think it took me six months to catch up on sleep (and the washing and the rest). Only when you stop do you realise how tired you are. For years I lived on six hours sleep a night. I caught up, breathed deep and looked around (Patrick 52).

Others, especially in the early stages, feel apprehension mixed with relief.

I still feel tense. It's a funny feeling in your tummy: 'Oh, I haven't got anything for the next few weeks, this is not looking good' (Paul 44).

Connor, who at 30 left a promising career in a big law firm to become a photographer, was also cautious.

I think it's important to make the point that downshifting is not 'a one size fits all' solution. When you read about examples of people who've downshifted in the newspapers, it all seems euphoric.

### **3.5 Overview**

Downshifters often stress that they are not dropping out of society but living in it in a new way. Previous research indicates that reducing working hours is the most popular way to downshift but changing to a lower-paying job, stopping paid work and changing careers altogether are also common. The participants involved in the current study mostly made more radical changes such as changing careers rather than just

reducing their hours of work. Frequently they exchanged high-pressure positions in the corporate world for lower paying positions in the non-profit sector or to start their own businesses. Nearly all experienced large declines in income, often to half or a quarter of previous levels.

While the ways in which downshiffters change their lives vary greatly, there are some notable similarities. When asked what they do without, the responses of our interviewees were remarkably uniform. All participants said that they eat out at restaurants much less frequently and spend less when they do. Almost all said they have given up costly holidays and many said they saved substantial sums because they no longer have to buy expensive clothes for work.

Downshiffters develop a wholly different approach to spending. They plan more carefully, avoid unnecessary trips to the shops and eschew the symbols of status. At the same time they report that they are much less preoccupied with money than before the life change.

The pattern of daily life also changes markedly once they have recaptured control over their time. They indicate that they enjoy less rigidly ordered lives. Many report that they spend more time out of doors engaged in healthy physical activity.

## 4. How do others react?

### 4.1 The Deferred Happiness Syndrome

The focus group discussions shed light on the mix of social attitudes to people who decide to make radical life changes in pursuit of more fulfilment. While the dream of a 'sea-change' has very widespread appeal, some believe that downshifting is a 'selfish' decision because it means abrogating responsibilities to family, especially children. The drift to private schooling and university fees seems to have intensified the expectation that parents will work harder to provide for their children. But time and again we found that people's hostility and incomprehension are mixed with envy and, in some cases, a hidden resentment at downshifters because, in the words of one, they 'have the courage to change' while their critics do not.

Some downshifters identified what might be called the Deferred Happiness Syndrome, a state where people persist for years in miserable and stressful jobs while always telling themselves they are preparing for a later time when they will be able to find a way of life that will make them contented and fulfilled. For most, the rewards never come. Downshifters may be thought of as those who have decided to defer their happiness no longer. Understood this way, it is not surprising that some downshifters attract resentment for 'bailing out' early.

The accusation of selfishness from some is in sharp contrast to the beliefs of downshifters themselves who see their decisions as motivated by the desire to give *more* to their families rather than less. But they are giving more time and affection. In the Canberra focus group, a downshifter who had been accused by friends and focus group members of 'bludging' put it this way:

A BMW won't give you a hug or draw you a picture.

So while many downshifters say they made the change in order to spend more time with family and friends, some friends and family members are skeptical and even antagonistic, as we will see.

This difference between downshifters' motives and some of the reactions of those around them reflects the most fundamental feature of the downshifting phenomenon, a change in personal values in which financial and material success is no longer the dominant motive. It spills over to everyday reactions. A young mother at the Gosford focus group told of how her friends are 'amazed' when they find that she does not own a microwave oven. There is a powerful, indeed overwhelming, assumption that everyone is committed to acquiring the best material lifestyle they reasonably can. It's just how life in Australia is, and the feelings of bewilderment and derision are typical responses to downshifters' decisions to flout this convention.

This is a fascinating commentary on the nature of the 'market society' that has developed over the last three decades. The spread of market values and consumerism reflects and reinforces a wider social shift towards individualism. Political leaders have promised more 'choice' and say they want to transfer responsibility from government to individuals. But it seems that only certain forms of individuality are acceptable, so that those who make individual choices to reject the dominance of market values in their own lives are characterised as 'crazy' or irresponsible. This

attitude is also held by many who recognise the more intense pressures people are under today, yet there is a view that people should be stoical and put up with the stresses for the sake of others. In the focus groups, a few argued that people should not reduce their incomes deliberately because they will pay less in tax.

#### **4.2 Madness, jealousy, sympathy**

Most downshifters report that they receive mixed reactions from their friends and family, although a few say they have received nothing but support. Many report that their friends and family are shocked when they make the change and they are frequently told that they must be ‘crazy’, ‘mad’ or ‘nuts’. At the same time, almost all downshifters note that many of their friends and colleagues expressed curiosity and envy. Alastair, who left a leading law firm in his late twenties to work as a volunteer in a developing country, said:

The week before I left the law firm I had a stream of people coming into the office, closing the door and going ‘OK, tell me how you did it? What websites did you visit, who do I call?’

Paul, who at 44 left a high profile job in journalism to run his own outdoors business, said:

A lot of my friends and colleagues have been very jealous... Everyone keeps saying ‘you’re so lucky’, they just keep saying ‘don’t come back’.

Timothy, who left a highly lucrative but alienating corporate position to work in a charity, said:

Most of our close friends showed understanding, sympathy and even some empathy. Some were very envious. Many would also downshift if they weren’t so fearful of losing financial security.

Jane, who left the public service with health problems before settling into a life as a registered nurse working part-time, observed:

My friends have reacted very positively... I now receive compliments about how well I look and this reminds me of how tired I must have been previously. I didn’t encounter anyone who said my decision was a bad one.

Some say that their decisions have been an inspiration to others. Connor, whose income initially fell by 90 per cent when he left his profession, found some of his friends were envious while others, including family members, have been inspired to transform their own lives. He himself was stimulated by a couple of close friends who had made similar changes.

Craig worked long hours in the television industry and was brought to a change in part by a recognition that he was neglecting his relationship with his children. He retrained as a chiropractor. Most of his friends thought it was a smart move but his parents and siblings could not understand why he was throwing in his reliable, safe job for a risky venture.

Negative reactions can be intensified by cultural expectations. In her early thirties Sasha abandoned her career as a medical professional to become a counsellor. She

had to withstand intense disapproval from her parents who had grown up on the Indian sub-continent and displayed an acute version of the Deferred Happiness Syndrome.

They thought I was just weak and running away from my problems... Their attitude was: 'Well you're not supposed to be happy. Work is work, and it pays the rent. You have all these nice things. What's wrong with you; what more do you want?'

Sasha began to question whether there was something wrong with her, and why her large income did not make her happy.

Most downshifters remain secure in their decision and have their own analysis about the fears and rigidities of those who criticise them. Patrick, the policy adviser, observed:

When I ran into old colleagues and told them what I was doing I could see they thought: 'What a waste, get your act together'. I'm not really conscious of these things so I got over it pretty quickly. ... I haven't lost any true friends, but some secondary acquaintances. ... I now ring up and insist that my busy friends take a break to have coffee or lunch with me, which I consider to be a social service.

### **4.3 Separating out true friends**

A consistent theme to emerge from the interviews was the observation that the life change decision caused downshifters to sort out their true friends from the ones that didn't really matter to them.

I think the changes we've made to our lives have really shown who our friends are. The people who we now look on as acquaintances think we're mad, but our real friends have said 'good on you'. It's been very interesting to see who in the community has been supportive (Andrea, 46).

Downshifters often move into a new social environment. They drift away from some of their friends and work colleagues both because their lives are now different and because the decision to downshift uncovers some fundamental conflicts in values. Franco (29) was told by a good friend that he could expect to lose a lot of friends because he would develop different interests.

Initially I thought: 'No way, I've known these people for twelve years'. But the more I thought about it the more I thought it was really insightful. I found it scary and disappointing, but realised it was inevitable.

The prediction proved accurate.

I don't socialise with my uni friends anymore. I feel that because my values have shifted and because I am at a different stage in my life I find it harder to talk to them.

This often leads to awkward conversations, and then contact is avoided. Damien earned a high salary as an accountant while still young but suffered a breakdown in

his health before eventually taking up a job with an environment organisation and experiencing a large drop in income.

My friends changed a lot, as they no longer had the same values as me. Having a child also changed the way my partner and I socialise. We pursue our own interests rather than worrying about what everyone else is doing.

Downshiffters often find it difficult to explain to relatives and friends what they are doing and why. This is partly because, until recently in Australia, downshiffters have felt that their decisions have been made in isolation. One interviewee (Rachel) said that it took a long time to explain her decision to her siblings partly because the term 'downshiffting' was not used at the time. Some downshiffters are accused of adopting a superior attitude, perhaps because they sometimes see some of their friends differently. As Craig said:

I now feel sorry for my friends who are consumed by money and material goods. Many of them are battling to keep up a first world existence. I don't think my values have changed - I have had them all my life. I never had a high consumption lifestyle ... I was a bit of an outcast in my family as my parents were into a mainstream, materialistic lifestyle.

When he returned from time overseas in a developing country, Franco (29) said he realised that:

Many of my friends who were still in money-oriented careers found many of my thoughts confronting and became defensive when I talked. I found that I need to be careful not to criticize their lifestyles and appear arrogant.

Several of the downshiffters interviewed see themselves as always having been outside the mainstream, as mavericks. Some say that they were rebels when they were growing up.

Although we know from the earlier study that downshiffters are socially and demographically diverse, among the sample interviewed in depth for this study it appears that some who make a more radical change to their lives wait until their children are grown or in their mid to late teens before taking the plunge. The children are by that stage judged to be capable of dealing with their parents' decision. Andrea, in her late forties, said this of her step-children:

By the time we made the change, it was a bit of a non-issue with the children, aged about 16 and 18 at the time. ... However, they couldn't understand our decision at all, couldn't relate to it at all. I think a lot of this attitude came from their mother, who is very conventional.

One Sydney couple in their early 50s, whose income fell by two-thirds to \$40,000 a year, reported that their grown children were shocked by their decision, but their worry about how they would survive financially subsided over time. Others decide to make the change while their children are very young and sometimes the birth of a child prompts the rethink. Craig took this path so that he could 'fix the gate before the horse bolted'. He feels he now has much more time to be there for his children, attending their sporting events and participating in after-school activities.

#### 4.4 Change in status

Previous studies have identified loss of status as something many downshiffters must deal with, particularly those who make far-reaching changes to their lives. This study sheds considerable light on this complex issue. Franco, who had a promising career in the finance industry before quitting to work in a developing country, said:

My friends often question my decision and don't seem to understand how I can be comfortable with stopping my career to do something different ... I am affected by what people think and say, but at the same time I am very confident of my own views.

Many of the interviewees seem to have prepared themselves for the loss of status; after all, one of the obstacles to making the decision to downshift is the fear of losing standing amongst one's peers and the community, and income and associated lifestyle are perhaps the most important markers of status. When our interviewees were asked if they had experienced a loss of status and how they coped, Andrea summed up the feelings of some.

Only in the eyes of people who don't matter. There are certainly people who now look down their noses at us, but in terms of our real friends and ourselves quite the opposite. I think we've actually gained a lot of respect from people who'd love to do the same thing but haven't got the guts. Certainly in our eyes we're prouder of ourselves because we've done what we really wanted to do, not kowtowed to society.

Timothy (33) distinguished between status and the symbols of status.

I didn't feel any loss of status on resigning [from his highly paid corporate job]. But I did notice that people judged me because of my lack of status symbols – the impressive job title, the company car, the overseas travel. Without these trappings, people treat me more warily. They are confused about what I am doing and why. But it was other people's sense of loss of my status, rather than my feeling any loss of these things.

Others are more ambivalent:

Sometimes I miss the status that I had in respect to working in the gallery and working at all, but now I have my art as a job. I feel that I have grown up a lot through this exploration of status. I now see status through defining yourself as something created in your own head and in some ways not very real. I realised that people aren't just defined by what they do (Leah 50).

'I think of status as something that you can take pride in', echoed Sasha. 'Status is a perception', she added, observing that she had never been proud of being a medical professional. Another younger interviewee, Simon, said: 'I don't think I have lost any status with people whose opinions I greatly respect'. However, Paul, who left a high profile job in journalism to run his own outdoors business, at times feels the loss of status keenly - 'Fame is especially important in journalism' - but at these times he reminds himself of the crushing pressures and family neglect that he escaped from. Changing perceptions of status are closely related to the change in values (or the expression of long-held values) reflected by downshiffters. They redefine what is

important in life and tend to reject conventional views. Thus Damien, who works for an environmental organisation, said:

There is a wealth of status that comes from being connected to the community.

There appears to be a sharp contrast in attitudes to downshifting between generations. While those in their forties and fifties are more inclined to be censorious of their friends and family members who make the change, those in their twenties and thirties are much more accepting. Simon, who left a high-flying legal career in his late twenties, said:

At that time friends were really important and I got some really good support ... They just said 'What's going on? What are you doing?' It was good. None of them were judgmental.

However, Franco (29) moved in different circles and found that his friends were more critical. While older people tend to place more emphasis on the security of a career, younger adults appear more willing to try different things and to pursue their interests rather than build walls of financial security. This is true at least of well-educated young people who have more options.

#### **4.5 Overview**

Most downshifters report that the reactions of family and friends are strong and contradictory. They are frequently told that they must be 'mad' to give up opulent lifestyles, abandon promising careers and subject themselves to financial risk. We have identified what may be dubbed the Deferred Happiness Syndrome, the widespread propensity for people to persist stoically in unhappy and stressful occupations while convincing themselves that they will be in a position to live happily at some later time.

While downshifters often meet skepticism and even hostility from their friends and colleagues, the same people frequently express curiosity and envy as well. Some downshifters are seen as inspirational. Many say that their decision to change has meant that they have separated their true friends, who have supported them, from other acquaintances. They drift away from the latter, and their old work colleagues, because they no longer share interests and their decision often exposes fundamental differences in values which can give rise to awkward conversations where downshifters are sometimes accused of being superior. In the face of these mixed and confused reactions, downshifters themselves appear to remain remarkably secure in their decisions.

Most downshifters in our study reported that they experience a loss of status. But they appear to have psychologically prepared themselves for this change in the way society views them. The new values they manifest imply that conventional perceptions of social standing mean much less to them. Some distinguish between status and the usual symbols of status, and find new forms of status in the work they do in the community.

## 5. Reflections on the experience

### 5.1 Difficulties encountered

Those interviewed for this study were asked about the difficulties they experienced as a result of downshifting. Financial concerns were usually the first-mentioned. Some indicated that they worry sometimes about whether they will be able to provide for their retirement (a subject discussed at more length in section 5.4). For many downshifters, at least amongst those who make more far-reaching changes such as those in our sample, there is an early period of adjustment. Some miss the ability to indulge in certain forms of ‘luxury’ spending – such as, in one case, being able to buy presents for friends – or to have the occasional ‘splurge’. In other words, the spontaneity that having plenty of money permits is replaced by greater financial discipline. Downshifters change the way they think about household finances.

The only real difficulty is when bills come in and you think: ‘How am I going to juggle this one?’ I wouldn’t actually say it was a difficulty, rather something that has to be managed. It’s become easier and easier as I’ve become better at it (Andrea, 46).

These anxieties are often more acute if the downshifter moves to a position without a regular salary. Timothy (33), who resigned from a highly paid corporate position and plans to work in the not-for-profit sector, said:

I miss the regularity of income; not so much the amount but the fact that it was there every couple of weeks, without thinking too much about it.

Most downshifters find that they have to be more careful in their spending, to plan more effectively and to exercise more discipline over that part of their lives. It is true to say, however, that the anxiety they feel about a substantial reduction in income is remarkably mild given the extraordinary emphasis society places on financial security. Downshifting represents a psychological transformation in which money and material things are relegated to a much diminished role in life’s priorities. In other words, adopting a different relationship to money is an essential part of the ‘contract’ that downshifters have with themselves.

Other changes present challenges too. While many found instant liberation, for some casting off an entrenched work ethic and adjusting to a different pattern of daily life was difficult. Andrea was interesting on this subject:

Perhaps the only difficulty has been stopping the sense of guilt, because when we made the change we both felt huge guilt about sitting and having a cup of coffee at 10.30 in the morning. ... Allowing yourself to be who you really are took a lot of doing, shedding all that indoctrination and the social expectations, that was probably the toughest.

Others have trouble adjusting to a new daily pattern. One reported that he wanted to take the opportunity to sleep in but that ‘wasn’t easy to do’. Another had the opposite problem: without the discipline of regular work he has to force himself to get up. In the case of those who give up regular full-time work, some report missing the social interaction of their former jobs and often seek alternatives through seeing more of

their friends or working in community organisations. Others miss the intellectual stimulation. Patrick, who had resigned as a political adviser at 46, observed:

I get intellectual stimulation from discussing things with my friends, keeping my ears open, listening to the radio and reading. I make a conscious decision to dig out friends for some dialogue over lunch. I have lost a lot of intellectual discipline and some other things, but I don't consider that those things make me a worthwhile human being.

## 5.2 The benefits

When asked to reflect on the benefits of downshifting the responses were dominated by references to relief and a new sense of personal freedom. Several talked of rediscovering the 'joy of living'. Fiona (52) described the experience as 'exciting rather than frightening' and, although she sometimes feels exhausted, most of the time she feels 'exhilarated'. 'The sense of relief has just got better and better' (Andrea, 46). 'I don't have to wear ties anymore' (Timothy, 33).

Many returned to the theme of taking control of their lives, of being able to make real life choices.

We now live by choice. What time will we get up? What shall we do today? We're not driven by external events' (Andrea, 46).

It's a more relaxed lifestyle, less stressful. In many ways, you're in charge of your own destiny (Paul, 44).

Downshifter often observe that the change opened up their lives to new opportunities that would formerly have been closed off to them. A few find the responsibility that goes with the freedom hard to cope with, although if this sense is too strong it seems to deter people from opting for the downshifting path.

Some, such as Franco (29), reflect on the social meaning of downshifting.

I find that the way society is structured in the workplace – people work all day, five days out of seven, doing the one thing – unbelievable. I find it staggering that as a population we do such a small number of things. I really like a variety of things ...

As this suggests, while motivated by a more fulfilling and less stressful lifestyle, some downshifter become more critical of society and become more politically engaged.

The pace of life changes after downshifting. Many talk of changing sleep patterns. Most talk of the slower pace of life.

People don't have time to chat anymore, and we used to be like that too. But our whole pace of life has slowed down. I even drive more slowly now. I don't know how I ever had time to work. Now I can listen to the birds, smell the roses (Andrea, 46).

For others the slower pace makes life less stimulating, although the time freed up can be devoted to creative and healthy pursuits such as whale watching and bush walking. A high proportion of interviewees mentioned musical pursuits.

### 5.3 Regrets

When asked if they had any regrets, there was a uniform chorus of ‘no’, except for a couple who regretted not doing it earlier. Downshifter talked of contentment, freedom and ‘bliss’. A few went on to say that they sometimes worried about whether they would have enough savings in retirement. Some said they would recommend downshifting unreservedly, but most believe it is not for everyone. One said that the situation is different for those with dependants. Connor, who left a law career to become a photographer, cautioned people not to be ‘under the illusion that the whole downshifting experience is euphoric’. Patrick, the former political adviser, said:

I wouldn’t recommend it to just anyone. There are a lot of my friends and acquaintances I wouldn’t recommend this to because I don’t think they could live without income or the structured work environment or the challenges that are presented to them through their work.

Perhaps the last word should be left to Andrea:

Anyone contemplating the change should be really honest with themselves. If people can’t admit to themselves what they really want, and be absolutely honest, don’t even attempt it.

### 5.4 Time, money, retirement

In the focus group discussions it became apparent that the life plans and objectives of many Australians, especially those in their forties and fifties, are dominated by the prospect of retirement. They consistently returned to this theme, indicating how insecure they felt about their ability to provide for a comfortable retirement in an era in which the Federal government had made it clear that they could no longer rely on the pension to meet their needs. Expectations about the amount of income needed in retirement appear to have escalated considerably and these self-imposed benchmarks put people under great pressure. At the same time, there has been a sharp change in perceptions of retirement amongst baby boomers in the professions and in managerial positions. They perceive no clear division between their working and post-working lives but believe that they will be able to wind down gradually over several years and may never retire fully. Indeed, some see the prospect of working hard to save for retirement then stopping to work to enjoy the fruits of one’s labour as pathological. As one put it: ‘If you see retirement as the end then you are doing the wrong thing’.

Through the course of the research for this report it gradually became apparent that there is a very sharp difference in attitudes to retirement between those who have and those who have not downshifted, and that this difference encapsulates the psychological shift that the life-change represents. While those who would not consider downshifting, or who have considered it but lack the resolve, are often preoccupied with saving for retirement to an almost obsessive degree – as one woman in her fifties said of her husband: ‘He’s even made a down payment on his old-person’s scooter’ – for those who have made the shift these worries seem to melt away. Questions about the insecurity of retirement generate immediate and animated responses from those who have not made the change but are met with puzzlement or unconcern by those who have. In the words of one in his forties: ‘When I worked for

[a major company] I was maniacally fixated on my superannuation account. Since resigning I no longer think about it’.

There appear to be two reasons for this. The first is that concern about financial futures is inescapable in a society preoccupied with money; but downshifting involves demoting the world of material possessions and financial security so that mental energy is directed elsewhere. It is impossible to live in the present if one is preoccupied with money. The second is that downshifter have proven themselves much more willing to take risks. Many seem willing to trust their future to fate instead of obsessively building walls of security around themselves, walls which they believe may be breached anyway. Perhaps a third reason can be distinguished from the latter: in contrast to the linear path of career progress in a chosen area, downshifter generally see their lives evolving in much more fluid ways, with change and unpredictability being a regular part of their life course.

## 5.5 Overview

Downshifter often report that they have concerns about their financial situation, including provision for retirement. But given the large reductions in income many experience (at least those in this study) their worries are surprisingly mild, a fact that reflects the changed attitude to money that is a constant of the downshifting experience.

Some downshifter have difficulty freeing themselves from the compulsion to work relentlessly and they sometimes feel guilty for relaxing. It takes time to become habituated to a slower pace of life and even to adjust to new sleeping patterns. Others miss the social interaction of their former workplaces and seek substitutes through new jobs and community activities.

A new sense of personal freedom and a rediscovery of the joy of living are the instant responses when asked about the benefits of the life change. Downshifter stress the satisfaction from regaining control over their lives. None had any regrets, except perhaps for the years lost before they made the change. But they would not recommend downshifting to everyone, believing that each individual has to be fully ready for the change.

The focus groups revealed that Australians in their forties and fifties are preoccupied with retirement, frequently expressing anxiety about whether they will have enough money to live comfortably. But a sharp difference in attitudes emerged between downshifter and others. The obsessive concern with saving for retirement seems to dissolve with the downshifting decision, and those who have made the change appear perplexed by the fixation of others on their superannuation accounts. This is partly because downshifter are simply less interested in pecuniary affairs and partly because they have shown themselves to be willing to take risks. They tend to welcome the uncertainty of life as an antidote to the stultifying effects of conforming to social expectations.

## 6. The social meaning of downshifting

At one level, the downshifting phenomenon is nothing more than the decisions of scattered individuals to change their life priorities. Such a perception is consistent with sociological analysis that has described the current stage of Western society in terms of ‘individualisation’ (e.g. Giddens 1998). According to this view, most of the old social determinants of personal circumstances – class, gender, race, religion – have fallen away and people are now in a position to choose their own life course, to ‘write their own biographies’, instead of having these dictated by the conditions into which they were born.

This is a shallow interpretation of the phenomenon. The process of individualisation itself must be understood in terms of the forces of social change. Moreover, it can be argued – as by Hamilton (2003a), for instance – that the dissolution of old social ties and influences did indeed leave a vacuum, but that vacuum was quickly filled by new social pressures, those associated with marketing and consumerism. If identity were to be no longer determined in large measure by one’s class, gender or cultural milieu, it was not then constructed out of nothing; it was shaped to an unprecedented degree by the symbols provided by the market and the ideology underlying modern consumer capitalism. Thus the decisions of downshiffters are taken under the influence of powerful social and cultural currents. It is apparent from the evidence gathered for this report, along with other work on downshifting, that the decision to downshift requires a process of unshackling oneself from overriding social expectations which are manifested at the broadest level and seep down to the personal reactions of intimate friends and family.

Since downshifting is now such a numerically significant phenomenon – it is a choice made by a quarter of adult Australians, and similar proportions in the USA (Schor 1998; Ray and Anderson 2000) and Britain (Hamilton 2003b) – it has become a social force. Already, marketing companies are advising their clients on how best to pitch their messages to these ‘anti-consumers’. In recent years, several books have appeared to cater to the downshifting trend, mostly ‘how to’ manuals, but also some serious social analysis (e.g. Drake 2000; Etzioni 1998). Downshifting is not yet a conscious political force, although the shift in priorities of this segment of the electorate must be beginning to influence voting patterns.

Perhaps before it becomes a political force, the social critique adhered to by most downshiffters, whether explicitly or after some consideration, will need to be debated more widely. There is no doubt that aspects of this critique are widely held in the community amongst those who have not contemplated downshifting. For example, 83 per cent of Australians agree that our society is too materialistic (Hamilton 2002) and most would recognise, with resignation, the Deferred Happiness Syndrome described earlier.

In a sense downshiffters differ because they have taken this critique and acted on it in their personal lives by reordering their priorities. In other words, rather than society perceiving the notion vaguely as ‘out there’, downshiffters think about what it means for their own decisions. Thus, in the words of one of our interviewees, Franco:

I think that because of the changes I have gone through *I live more consciously* and I believe that this will help my transition into living with less money. I have thought a lot about marketing and consumerism and I am now more conscious of the effect that these have on me. This in turn has affected my politics [emphasis added].

In a world where we are unconsciously, or semi-consciously, influenced by powerful forces to behave and think of ourselves in certain ways, living more consciously is a radical act.

It is clear from our interviews and focus groups that for most downshifter the change is one which involves taking control of their lives and living more consciously, and that making the change takes courage. This is anomalous. In a society that celebrates individual freedom and which, over the last two decades, has been dominated by the politics of neoliberalism that deifies consumer choice, why does it take an act of courage to choose to devote less time to earning money and acquiring things and more time to other pursuits? If people today are the authors of their own lives, why do they hesitate for so long before writing the next chapter? The answer is that, despite all of the rhetoric, only certain forms of choice are socially permissible, those that are consistent with acquisitiveness and the desire to get on. The result, as we have found, is that downshifter lose friends and lose status and their relationship to society changes, sometimes in a fundamental way. This is why it takes courage to decide to work less or take a lower-paying job. At the same time, downshifter often forge stronger friendships with supportive others and create lives that, for them, are more autonomous and fulfilling.

We know that downshifting is already widespread in Australia, and it appears that downshifter are more willing to 'come out' and defend their choices, suggesting that soon downshifting will no longer be seen to be an act of defiance. It will become an ordinary decision rather than a daring one. At that point, we will know that modern consumer society has undergone a far-reaching change.

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