

The trend to 'downshift' is here

 By [Keith Coats](#)

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In different shapes and forms, thousands are ditching the pressures of corporate life, selling up and simplifying their lifestyle in terms of the context in which they live and work. And it is not only those with the financial muscle or those close to the end of their careers who are doing so.

The business-speak for this emerging trend is 'downshifting' but the reality is that it is nothing new. Downshifting is the pursuit of meaning and purpose in both the nature and expression of one's work and then doing whatever it takes to achieve it. This often means taking a pay cut, moving to the country, bailing out the rat-race and turning a hobby into a source of income. In fact people have been doing it for centuries.

When the motivation for downshifting has taken some sort of spiritual context it is often easier to identify and label: The Desert Fathers, the Amish and the Quakers all being cases in point. Another expression of downshifting was the hippy movement - 'the flower power children' of the 1970's where alternative lifestyles were the choice many made and in so doing created a distinct sub-culture of their own.

This not so new phenomena is on the increase. In the USA it is said that 1:4 have taken pay cuts in the quest for a better quality life whilst in the UK the ratio is said to be 1:8. In developing countries such as South Africa, statistics are harder to come by and the nature and form of downshifting is likely to differ slightly to that of the developed countries.

As undeniable as this trend is, understanding what drives it is important. At first glance the trend is paradoxical and makes little sense in the light of a consumer-capitalistic culture. Greed, dissatisfaction with what one has and the unquenchable thirst for more, are fuelled by a relentless advertising blitz that feeds this frenzy. This is partly why Sweden has now banned TV advertising to children.

TomorrowToday.biz believes that contemporary downshifting is driven by three major and inter-related change drivers.

Firstly there is technology. The ability to virtual office and connect with almost anyone anywhere has lifted the restrictions on 'where and how work gets done'. Most coffee houses understand they are as much an office as they are a coffee shop. The Starbuck philosophy being the 'third place' away from home and the office has meant that in fact they are becoming 'the office' for many. Technology means that set geographic locations for work are no longer necessary..., but certainly for an increasing number of people and industries it is becoming more and more part of their reality.

Secondly there is the change in institutions. From what we expect a company to look like to how we celebrate Christmas, institutions as we know them are changing. Traditions that are perceived as being devoid of meaning are being questioned

and challenged.

The status quo, the norms, operational procedures and conventions are all being scrutinised for what value they add and where such inquiry or searching is prohibited or restricted, frustrations and resentment is not hard to find. The inflexibility of adapting to the need for institutional change adds momentum to the downshifting lemming run. We know that institutions that don't adapt, die. Where there is a refusal to adapt some are using their technology to simply by-pass, create alternatives and make bold statements through such actions.

Thirdly there is the shift in values as evidenced by a new generation making their mark in the corporate sector that is driving the downshifting trend. Coats explains that a new set of questions are being asked by Xers (Generation X: mid-teens to mid-thirties) in the workplace. These questions are radically different to those poised by Boomers (those between 35 - 55).

The point is that broad-based change is being driven through the impact of technology, institutional change and values shifts. Recognising the resultant trends such as downshifting becomes important for companies to understand and, where appropriate, respond to or else run the risk of losing valuable talent and /or experience. Such change makes some feel uneasy and long for the 'security' of the past or 'how things were once done'. That is a natural and understandable response. But it is also a potentially fatal response if it is allowed to impose itself on shifts that are irreversible.

The challenge for leaders everywhere is to understand some of the trends and paradoxes that infuse their world on a daily basis. Downshifting offers the opportunity to attract talent and retain experience...it just means that work might look a bit different.

ABOUT KEITH COATS

Keith Coats is a director of TomorrowToday.biz, an organisation that helps companies identify the mega trends that will impact the people connected to their business - employees, customers and partners. Coats is a recognised expert on leadership development and a facilitator, executive coach and futurist.

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