

Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture

Forthcoming 2010

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Version: 4th of December, 2008

Downshifting

Downshifting is a concept that was spreading in the United States during the 1990:s, starting with the book *Down-Shifting: Reinventing Success on a Slower Track* (Salzman 1991). Downshifting involves focusing less on paid work in order to have time to do more of the things one wants to do while cutting out unnecessary expenditure. But it does not mean going to the extremes and deviating too far from common behaviour or attempting self-sufficiency. The concept is also used in England, Australia and other industrialized countries, e.g. in Sweden where it quickly won acceptance in 2008.

The term is derived from changing gear in a car in order to drive more slowly. It can be defined as making a voluntary, long-term change in one's lifestyle that involves accepting significantly less income and consumption. One encyclopaedia defines it as a change from a financially rewarding but stressful career to a less well paid but more fulfilling one (www.wordweonline.com). Downshifting often has to do with practical changes which reflect a relatively low level of orientation towards work and consumption.

Ideas about an ascetic or simple life, coupled with frugality and limited aspirations, are well known in most major religions, as well as in the literature. An example is the still popular book *Walden* (1855) by Henry David Thoreau which describes a simple life in the forest far from the urban stress.

Media are often using downshifting and the term voluntary simplicity as exchangeable concepts. The latter term was spreading through the 1980:s through a book by Duane Elgin entitled *Voluntary simplicity* (1981). The subtitle *Towards a life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich* has become a slogan for the American simplicity movement. However, these concepts can be seen as separate categories. One difference is that the simplifier may have lived simple all her life while the downshifter per definition must have made a significant change. Another major difference is that the simplifier, but not the downshifter, is driven by a coherent and articulated philosophy which includes a concern for environmental issues. This goes beyond just buying environmentally friendly products by also focussing on the moral imperative of a low level of consumption.

The concept of downshifting has gained importance in a context on long working hours and frequent overtime work. Reports on stress, time-pressure, consumerism, rat-race and problems of maintaining a balance between work and private life are quite common. Many also find Western societies too materialistic and focused on money and consumption. Downshifting is a reaction to our work-oriented consumer culture and an antithesis of the yuppies of the eighties. Downshifter often suggest that the marginal utility from consumption is declining when consumption levels are increasing. Downshifting has become a concept which catches the dream of a lifestyle with more time and balance. A popular joke in books on downshifting is that the problem with the rat-race is that even if you win you are still a rat.

Is downshifting widely practiced or is it just a common dream? The most cited academic survey on downshifting (Schor 1998) states that 19 per cent of the US respondents declared that they voluntarily had made a long term change in life in the last five years – other than taking a regularly scheduled retirement – which had resulted in making less money. Similarly, Hamilton (2003) found the numbers to be around 25 per cent in telephone surveys in Great Britain and Australia.

Voluntary downward earning mobility has also been analyzed by Dwyer (2004) using longitudinal data (1983-1992) from the US. He shows that almost ten per cent of the employees below the age of 60 had voluntarily changed to a job with at least ten per cent less pay during the last ten years. Dwyer concludes that a significant number of workers are trading extrinsic values of the job such as pay and status for intrinsic values such as flexibility and a reduced amount of working hours. Some were motivated to take a job with lower pay in order to get greater autonomy through self-employment or a move to another geographic location. But the most common reason to accept reduced income was that the new job demanded fewer working hours. Several quantitative studies support the efficiency of downshifting through a strong association between shorter hours and lower feelings of time pressure (Larsson 2007; Lippe 2007).

It is often proposed that downshifters usually are professionals with very high incomes and therefore more easily can make do with a cut in pay. But the study by Dwyer (2004) found that the pay from the last job was only about 30 per cent higher for downshifters compared with individuals changing to a job with similar or higher pay. Schor (1998) also found that the majority of the downshifters don't have very high incomes and subsequently calls her analysis *The Downshifter Next Door*.

The amount of websites and self-help books on downshifting are almost overwhelming. A content analysis of some of these books claimed that two of the core suggestions were to lower the aspirations of career success and of "having it all" (Larsson and Sanne 2005). Surveys on work hour preferences reveal a widespread wish for shorter hours even when it involves a cut in pay. But even if the focus on downshifting seems to be increasing in many Western countries it isn't something that large portions of the population practice. The advice from the downshifting literature – to focus less on career and money, and more on relationships and balance in life – are well in line with the research on what enhances life satisfaction. Implementing this single-handed, lacking the support of one's mates, friends and colleagues and supporting societal structures, is entailed with major obstacles.

One obstacle is that most workplaces are organised around full-time jobs which do not admit cuts in working hours. In most sectors there is also a full-time norm and it might be viewed as disloyal towards both the employer and the colleagues to work less. Another problem is that even if shorter hours are agreed upon formally, the reduction of tasks and responsibilities might not follow automatically. The lack of good part-time jobs might also make it more difficult to find a job where one utilizes one's skills and abilities to the fullest. This is not only increasing the risk of getting a less interesting job and of getting a job which pays less per hour (Frank 1999). These problems are reasons for many downshifters to try the route of becoming self-employed (Meiksins and Whalley 2002).

Another obstacle is that work and consumption are central for shaping our identity, both through being a professional in a certain field of work and through the consumption

possibilities that the salary entails. With a lower focus on work and consumption the downshifter has lesser possibilities of signalling status and shaping a positive identity. An illustration of these problems is that it is reported that some downshifters are wearing one expensive or stylistic item in order to distinguish from the poor (Etzioni 1998) – something that can be described as conspicuous non-consumption, paraphrasing what Veblen (1899/1994) called conspicuous consumption more than 100 years ago.

Due to these obstacles, downshifting is hardly a solution for relieving the problems of long hours and time pressure available to everyone today; it is rather a private adaptation in absence of a general solution. However, if a sufficient amount of pioneers would overcome these obstacles it would change norms related to work and consumption which would make it easier for others aspiring to downshift.

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