

Want to Keep your Good People? Think about this...

By David Brewster

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Remember that classic 1970s TV series 'The Good Life'? (It was called 'Good Neighbors' in the US). Its central characters, Tom and Barbara, would now be called 'downshifTERS': people who jump out of the rat race to lead a more simple life. In the 21st century, downshifting is 'in'. This has serious implications for businesses large and small.

A recent report by market analysts Datamonitor* found that in order to simplify their lives, an increasing number of people are volunteering to reduce the amount of work they do. Many are managers who have been highly successful in their careers. Many are taking significant pay cuts in order to 'escape'.

The report showed that the number of downshifTERS in Britain grew to about 2.6 million in 2002. The figure in 1997 was 1.7 million. Across Europe the number grew by over 5% per annum over this period. There seems no reason why this trend would not be similar in most developed countries.

The reasons for the trend include "too many demands on time [and] too much information", according to the report's author, Dominik Nosalik. The research showed that "the internet, emails and mobile phones [have] added to employees' feelings of being overworked. People felt that, because they could work anywhere, they were working everywhere."

(Can you see the paradox here? The increased availability of technology that is supposed to make our lives easier is contributing to feelings of quite the opposite.)

Now I think it's fantastic that more and more people are questioning their careers and opting to simplify them. Having done it myself, and as an advocate of simplification, I could hardly do otherwise. But there are other issues here.

It is costly for businesses to lose good people – and their knowledge – to the downshifting trend. What's more, for every downshifter, there must be several others who feel similarly overwhelmed but don't feel they can face the risks of downshifting. These people can't be working at their peak.

Surely it would be better for all if people were able to simplify the jobs they are doing, rather than downshifting out?

It can be done. But it requires managers at all levels to commit to finding simpler ways of working and more mature ways of using technology. And it requires a team effort. After all, Tom and Barbara only achieved the 'good life' by committing to it and working at it together.

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*Findings of the Datamonitor report were reported in a piece by Sarah Womack in the London Telegraph. You can read the article here:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=%2Fnews%2F2003%2F04%2F16%2Fnshift16.xml>

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