

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Sunday, January 7, 1996

# Shifting gears: Leaving the corporate world

**SHIFTING GEARS** from G1 magazine on — what else? — parenting.

Some trend-watchers are calling this a movement and dubbing it "downshifting," "reassessing success" or even "voluntary simplicity," part of the West Coast phenomenon of the same name that extols the virtues of less work, less money, and therefore, less things. (Most of us are more familiar with involuntary simplicity, as in cutbacks and unemployment.)

Whatever the buzzword, a reordering of priorities is taking place.

Studies show more men and women are turning down promotions or assignments heavy on travel, reducing hours from full-time to part-time, and refusing overtime. Most often the reason is simple: They want to better balance work and family, and in many more cases, they want to tip the scale in favor of greater family time.

Women, it seems, are leading the way to a simpler lifestyle. A 1995 poll commissioned by the Merck Family Fund showed that 32 percent of the female respondents reported voluntarily downshifting, compared with 23.5 percent of the men.

But this isn't the 80s revisited. These women still want to work, still want to achieve.

"What we're hearing a lot from men and women is how overworked they are," said Marcia Bramit Kropp, vice president of research and advisory services for Catalyst, a woman's advocacy group in New York that consults with companies. "What they're looking for is a different kind of work environment ... where they have control over their work lives."

A DuPont Co. study of its workforce released in the fall found that employees have made certain trade-offs to balance their work and family obligations.

Of the approximately 6,300 respondents, about one-third of the employees were not available for reloca-



**Tina Fink** (with daughter Amy nearby) personalizes a child's bench for her company, *Delivered With Love*, which she operates out of her home.

tion; about one-fourth turned down jobs that required more travel; about one-fifth refused overtime or a job with more pressure; and 12 percent passed up promotions.

"Family is becoming more important to today's generation," said Cindi Johnson, senior work/life specialist for DuPont. "I believe that's a shift from 20, 30 years ago. Now there's such a time crunch. People are asking for a little more flexibility."

While employees have long complained about stress, lack of time and work/family issues, only more recently have these employees — at least the ones who can afford to easily give up income and still live comfortably — actually made choices in favor of their families and at the expense of their careers.

It's as if a generation of women, after juggling, balancing, flexing till every muscle ached, is finally turning away from the notion of "doing it all."

Maybe it's the backlash to corporate downsizing. If your employer isn't loyal to you, why should you be loyal to your employer? Maybe it's the midlife crisis. You wonder what's the point of this rat race. Maybe it's simply stress.

Some workplace observers describe downshifting in terms of changes in values and mind-sets, a group of men and women realizing the pleasures of parenthood and self-confident enough to find enough esteem in that.

"When they started their careers, they thought CEO was the be-all, end-all. When they had children, they realized this is a priority and it mitigates the drive for CEO," said Karen Noble, senior consultant for Rodgers & Associates, a division of Work/Family Directions in Boston.

"I had a five-year plan and everything. My goal was to have my own PR organization by the time I was 30," said Rosemarie Fabien, 37 and not the head of her own PR agency. Instead, she is the mother of two, has a Ph.D. in American literature, and works part-time as director of strategic communications for the Hillier Group, an architecture firm in Center City. When she talks about her ambitions and her reality, she sounds content, not one bit wistful for what might have been.

"I interview prospective students for Barnard College. I'm president of the day-care parents association. I can actually make a meal for everybody, make Christmas crafts and plan family trips," Fabien said.

It is she said, a change in values for her and for her husband, Tom Normile, 39, a structural engineer. Once he worked 12-hour days, seven days a week while in Hong Kong. When he returned to the States and had children, he made some changes. Now, he keeps set hours at Christakis VanOcker Morrison, a consulting engineer firm in Wayne, making a point of dropping off his children at day care and arriving home in time for dinner.

"I haven't made the sacrifices that Rosemarie has, although it's hard to say what I'd be doing if I didn't have a family," Normile said one evening, after the bath-and-story routine with his 3-year-old and 6-month-old.

Still, he often brings work home and struggles to make a 7 a.m. Friday meeting. "I'm often late," he allowed. But in the end, he said it's all worth it. "I love my kids. They're my reason for being."

Others are leaving corporate America altogether — either because employers cannot accommodate flexible schedules or because even part-time hours at some major companies amount to long days away from home.

Until recently, Rachel Ezekiel-Fishbein, 31, worked for Earle Palmer Brown, commuting from her Elkins Park home to flashy, bustling Liberty Place five days a week.

"This was the big league. . . . It was a lifestyle," she said of the big accounts, the look she put together each morning, the recognition she won for her efforts. She loved it all.

Then baby Daniel came along. Initially, Ezekiel-Fishbein said she hoped to return to Earle Palmer Brown and work four days a week, some from home, so she'd have more time with her son.

"They tried. . . . (But) the company I worked for wasn't prepared yet for a woman who wants to mix priorities," she said, sitting at her dining table in leggings, a T-shirt and jean jacket while her son dozed in an infant seat. (Lonny Strum, the agency's president, said Ezekiel-Fish-

bein, who left on good terms, could have worked part time but chose to pursue her own business interests.)

Last month, she started her own PR agency — with her name on it — and landed three clients, allowing her to maintain her income (which was a priority) with only half the hours of her previous job.

"I feel it gives me more control over my own destiny," she said, looking forward to leaving the corporate game. "I'm looking forward to making the rules."

Still, none of this means her decision was easy, she said. "I'm not representing CoreStates. That was a big status thing." But, she said, she needed to "simplify" her life. Besides, she has found a new source of self-esteem in saying, "I'm out of the corporation."

Then, Ezekiel-Fishbein added, "It's not that one day I don't want to go back and be a vice president."

There's the rub. Many of those who leave the fast-track corporate world actually love it. But for whatever reason, the balance just wasn't attainable.

"That's the greatest hurdle over which society — has to jump," said Noble of Work/Family Directions. "We're still an hours-driven society and visibility means everything."

She said corporations need to rethink the way they compensate and reward employees, the way they develop employee careers and evaluate job performance. An assignment in an exotic locale — which also means uprooting the family — may no longer be the best way to recognize a good employee.

"All of these systems have to be realigned to a more results-oriented structure," she said.

In the meantime, some of corporate America's best and brightest are simply walking away, charting their own direction.

"It is a tradeoff," allowed Jackie Needleman, 29, the former San Francisco investment banker. "It still saddens me. There is a certain loss of identity."

But as she works on ParentsPlace.com, a resource on the Internet for parents, and enjoys great times with her husband and almost-18-month-old son, she says with no uncertainty, "It's a tradeoff I would do over and over again."

## Album

