

**TRIGGERS:
WHY PEOPLE DO IT**

HOBBY BUG: A passion for pursuing a hobby unshackled by the demands of a job.

OUTGROWING MONEY: The realisation that big money is not everything.

SEEKING FULFILMENT: Quest for satisfaction over designations and promotions.

OFFICE STINGS: Inability to handle office politics.

SELF-BELIEF: Belief in personal abilities to challenge monotony at work.

BEING ALIVE: Persistent need for growth, development and change.

TAKING CHARGE: Desire to live life by design, not default.

LENDING A HAND: Strong obligation to "give back" to society.

WHEN LOVE BECKONS: Answering a "calling in life"—theatre, music, social work, philanthropy.

GIMME A BREAK: Need to take a sabbatical to unwind, take stock.

VRS CUSHION: Voluntary retirement schemes that support risk-taking.

SECURING THE FUTURE: Fewer guarantees of life-long pensions and absence of social security.

SIXTY PLUS: Post-retirement blues.

OVERCOMING AGE: Challenging rigidity and apathy in old age.

N-HAZARD: Loneliness in isolated nuclear families.



Freedom

RUNNERS

An increasing number of Indians are saying goodbye to fat salaries and fancy designations to pursue their dreams. For them, satisfaction and freedom are incentive enough to opt out of the daily grind.

By Shefalee Vasudev and Anjali Doshi

Freedom usually stands for "nothing left to lose". In the original context, as a rock 'n' roll-inspired catch phrase for the rebellious young generation of the 1960s and early '70s, it was a reflection of the prevailing anti-establishment mood. It is a lyric that is beginning to be heard with increasing frequency once again—in 2004—and it is coming from people with secure, high-paying jobs, people with plenty to lose. Like Delhi-based Amitabh Bhattacharya, who had a roaring business as a maker of Ayurvedic medicines. Eleven years ago, at 43, he shut shop, giving up 70 years of business goodwill to become a photographer. "I was forced to run the business after my father's premature death, but my heart was always in photography," says Bhattacharya. "As the years went by, I felt I was living only half my life as the passion became stronger." Now Bhattacharya routes the money he earns from his new vocation into a photography school. "I haven't taken a better decision," he says. Across the country, his sentiments and his actions are being replicated by a surprisingly large number of people, from corporate high-fliers to entrepreneurs. Moreover, such decisions are also

Umesh Malhotra, 35

“I was getting tired of expressions such as ‘creating wealth’ and ‘adding value’.”

Umesh and his wife Vimla quit well-paying jobs in the infotech sector to launch a library in Koramangla in 2003. It has a free reading area called Hippocampus and is open to the underprivileged.



being taken by like-minded married couples who are forsaking the security of having one spouse with a stable income. Bangalore-based Ramesh Ramanathan, 39, an MBA from Yale, and his wife Swati, an architect from New York, quit their successful careers to fund Janagraaha, an NGO that works for civic awareness in Bangalore. “Beyond a point money isn’t everything, you need to have a sense of service and give it your best shot,” says Ramesh.

In fact, that is one call that is inspiring a majority of those who are quitting lucrative jobs to explore what management guru Peter Drucker calls the “second career”. Dr Bobby John, 35, left three jobs after being convinced that hospitals were more about balance sheets than healthcare. He is now happy with his own NGO called Massive Effort, a Pune-based organisation that mobilises society to counter AIDS, TB and malaria. The money is uncertain, the hours erratic but the satisfaction is huge, says John.

In the madding crowd of careerists and go-getters, the Ramanathans and John belong to a group of well-to-do professionals who do not want their lives to be governed by



fancy designations or ascending salaries. These are men and women willing to court recurrent uncertainties to see their dreams come true. Bangalore-based Vishal Talreja is just 26. Instead of joining the brat pack, he raises funds for Dream-a-Dream—a Bangalore-based charitable trust working with more than 200 underprivileged and HIV-positive children. Talreja was haunted by his “calling” three years ago and quit a blooming career with an investment banking company in Mumbai to go in for an uncertain life in the service sector. “I knew I wanted to do this kind of work so instead of waiting, I decided to take the plunge right away,” says Talreja, who feels satisfied in a pursuit that is neither quantifiable nor tangible. He is a true freedom runner.

Such people, says Delhi-based psychoanalyst Madhu Sarin, “have some unthreatened sectors of the personality

Rashmi, 32, and Yatin Bansal, 38

“If you don’t experiment right away, you will keep living the shadow of the life you wanted to live.”

Graduates from IIM-Ahmedabad, they quit their high-paying jobs to start youth magazine *Jam*. They say that the money is not as good but the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile for society offsets that.

which are free to respond to the urge for change”. Sarin herself, after teaching philosophy for 14 years in Delhi University, gave it up to start afresh as a student of psychoanalysis in the US at the age of 39. “I uprooted myself, left my family and culture to become an apprentice in the second half of my life,” she says. “My motivation came from the need for growth.” While philosophers and psychologists from Plato to Carl Gustav Jung emphasised that the fundamental essence of a person’s individuality always breaks through, more and more people are now proving that it is this individuality that guides them in shaping their choices.

Management writer Bob Buford, who wrote *Half Time*, talks about the time in life when men in suits get the urge to dirty their hands and do something meaningful. “We did a stock check in our mid-30s and decided to give back to society all that it has given us,” says Ramesh. It is the same philosophy that Rashmi and Yatin Bansal, both IIM-Ahmedabad graduates, followed when they quit their highly paid jobs in 1995 to start *Jam*, a magazine for the youth. The Mumbai-based Bansals say that the creative satisfaction of doing something worthwhile for society compensates for the fat salaries they sacrificed.

All across the country, the list of similar people is grow-



Sheila Govindaraj, 35

“In the beginning theatre was a therapy but I now realise that it is my life’s tonic.”

She returned to her first love theatre after a decade in the software industry. Her calling did what the best-seller *The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling* promises it will—make its claim.

ing. Who doesn’t feel the pressure of taking on too much at work and stretching oneself too far? But the freedom runners are people who are doing something to change that. Ajit Kaikini resigned from his post as the chief pharmacist of Manipal Hospital, Bangalore, to teach life skills to children through Buoyancee, an activity centre for children. Umesh and Vimla Malhotra, both 35, too gave up high-flying careers in infotech to launch a library in Koramangla in 2003. This unique library with a free reading area is open to the underprivileged. “I was getting tired of expressions such as ‘creating wealth’ and ‘adding value’, so I gave it up for this,” says Umesh, who worked with Infosys for 11 years.

Not all are bitten by the bug of voluntary work but they are sure that they want to break free from traditional career paths to do something quite different. Sheila Govindaraj, after a decade in the software industry, has returned to her first love, theatre. “In the beginning theatre was a therapy but now I realise it is my life’s tonic,” says Govindaraj, 35. She, like many others, was succumbing to the thesis of James Hillman’s book *The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, “A calling may be postponed, avoided or intermittently missed ... But eventually it will make its claim.”

Of course, it is not an easy decision. The price is paid not

Creative satisfaction in doing something useful is a big factor.

GIREESH G.V.



FAWZAN HUSAIN



Bharat Shahane, 46

“After leaving the army, I have lots of that precious commodity—time.”

Shahane quit his job as a lieutenant-colonel in the army a year and a half ago and took to his long-time love—photography. He is happy that now he can do what he always wanted to.

Vishal Talreja, 26

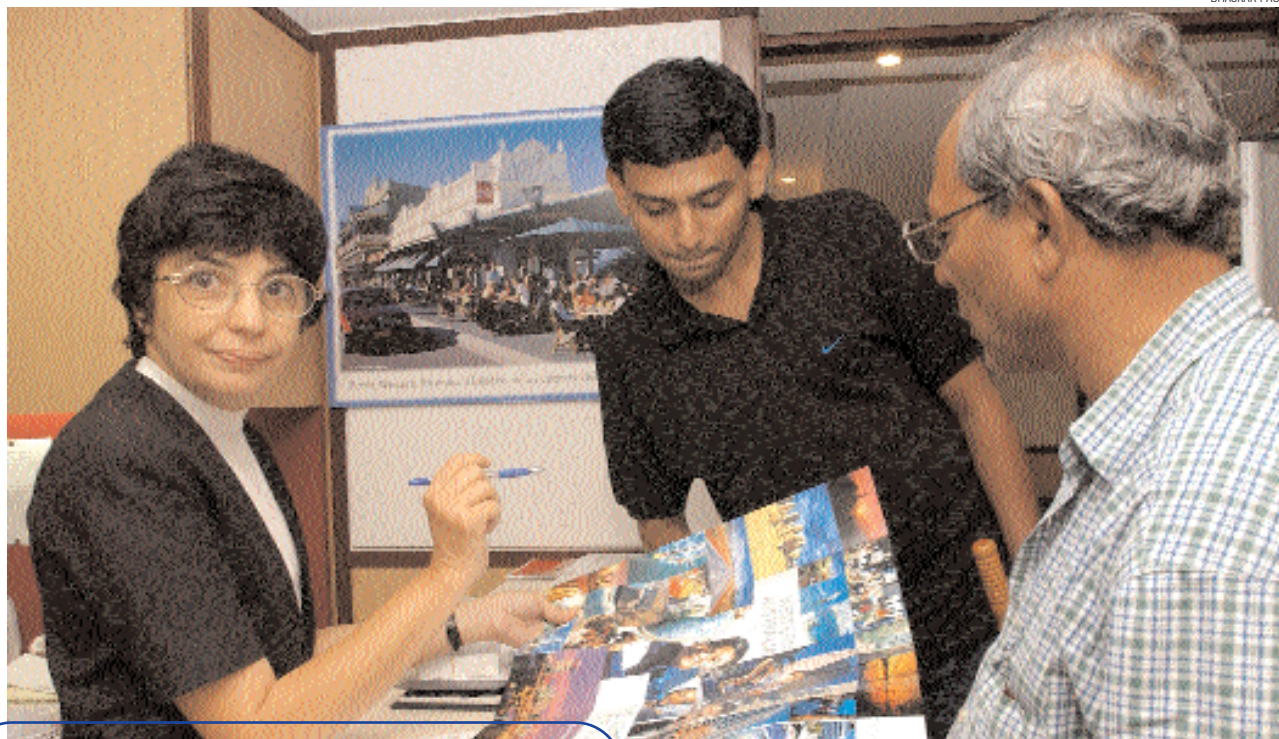
“I wanted to do something different. I did not wait but took the plunge right away.”

Talreja quit a blooming investment banking career three years ago to pursue his true vocation—raising funds for a charitable trust that works with underprivileged and HIV-positive children.

only by the person who allows his spirit to rule but also by spouses, children, friends, collaborators and mentors. Many admit to cyclic visitations of doubt. But this has not deterred people who do hear that call and are willing to exchange a secure routine for freedom, with all its painful uncertainties. Like Mumbai-based photographer Bharat Shahane, 46, who was a lieutenant-colonel in the Indian Army till a year and a half ago. “The high-wire fence was more to keep us in than others out,” he says, laughing as he admits he has always wanted to become a shutterbug. “Now I have lots of that precious commodity—time.” It is about treating time as a treasure, not a noose. “If you must experiment, now is the time. Otherwise you will keep living the shadow of the life you wanted to live,” feels Bansal.

That is something Prem Kamath may agree with. He quit his job as head of management resources in Hindustan Lever Ltd a month ago when a foreign posting threatened to cause personal and professional upheaval. He made a foray into organic farming and is also setting up a consultancy firm that will guide companies on leadership and

For many, sense of service scores over ascending salaries.



Aban Hirjikaka, 52

“I was slipping and needed a new challenge. There is more satisfaction in working now.”

After 15 years in the marketing and finance departments of ACC, Hirjikaka took VRS and, at an age when people look at retirement, became a student counsellor with Western Australia Trade Offices.

organisational transformation. “Everybody in my family has always worked for someone else,” says Kamath, whose 20-acre farm is a two-hour drive from Mumbai. “In my second innings, I wanted to be my own boss.”

Kamath belongs to the brigade of resilient 40- and 50-somethings embarking on a second career. A tad different from the young and ambitious throwing up ambitions to walk the road not taken but equally determined about their choices. Having devoted 20-30 years in jobs, they are moving into a new phase of their professional lives. Voluntary retirement schemes (VRS), an uncertain savings environment, a fall in income from fixed deposits and no guarantee of life-long pension are making a certain section of people take a relook at careers.

There are other contributing reasons. Increasing life spans, spread of nuclear families, post-retirement restlessness and acute depression are other factors influencing the push; 10-15 per cent of employees who took VRS have moved on to second careers. While the 20-40 age group dominates the job market, the 45-plus segment is not retreating into

oblivion. An evolving economy, with a thrust on knowledge and services, is providing them opportunities that did not exist before. They are becoming software consultants, insurance advisers, direct sales agents for telecom and credit card companies and call centre workers.

While money is the prime reason for a second career, there are many who go for it to remain productive and enhance their self-esteem. Like Hema Damania, who was among the first to opt for VRS from Bank of India four years ago. “I had made sound investments. It was time to relax,” says the 57-year-old. But soon Damania was fretting with precious little to do. So she became an independent auditor. Her second career earns her a third of her previous salary but Damania says, “My monthly expenses are covered.”

With rising life expectancy and little social security, the money put aside for retirement is often not enough to see one through long periods. “The stereotypical perception is that older people are rigid, outdated, slow and not tech-savvy,” says Sheilu Srinivasan, president of the NGO Dignity Foundation. “We don’t acknowledge that their experience and strategic thinking might actually be an advantage.” As India moves from an agricultural economy to a knowledge economy, the working life of employees may well extend from the current 30 years to 50 years. Shahane, however, throws a line of caution. “It is learning to ride the current with an eye on that rainbow—as long as you know that there is no pot of gold at the end of it,” he says.

The rainbow of freedom though is too powerful a call for those riding it to worry about what is on its other side.

with Stephen David and Nirmala Ravindran

Many opt for a second career to enhance their self-esteem.