



## *Carpe Diem*

A report from the  
**Social Issues Research Centre**

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## 1 Introduction

**“Ask not – we cannot know – what end the gods have set for you, for me; nor attempt the Babylonian reckonings Leuconoë. How much better to endure whatever comes, whether Jupiter grants us additional winters or whether this is our last, which now wears out the Tuscan Sea upon the barrier of the cliffs! Be wise, strain the wine; and since life is brief, prune back far-reaching hopes! Even while we speak, envious time has passed: pluck the day, putting as little trust as possible in tomorrow!”**

**Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) 68BC – Ode I-XI, Carpe Diem.**

Earlier this year the Social Issues Research Centre undertook an in-depth study for The National Lottery of the extent to which a sense of optimism prevails in Britain, even in times of economic downturn and gloom-and-doom in the newspapers<sup>1</sup>. To what extent are we characterised as a nation by ‘always look on the bright side of life’? Or are we as a people more ‘mustn’t grumble’ types?

What we found was pleasantly surprising. A high level of optimism prevails in the country, even in difficult times. It is tempered, of course, by a degree of caution at times – what we called ‘situational’ optimism – and our sense of optimism is focused primarily on our families, our personal relationships and our social life. While we tend to be upbeat about these matters, however, we are far less optimistic about the future of British society as a whole.

A question remained at the end of this study. If people are, in the main, generally optimistic, does this mean that they are people likely to seize opportunities wherever they find them in the belief that the outcomes will be positive? Or is the ability to ‘go for it’ – ‘to seize the day’ – a reflection of a different aspect of our make up?

And so we start at the top of this introduction with an extract from one of Horace’s famous odes – written over two thousand years ago but still very pertinent today. Being fond of agricultural metaphors, Horace issues the Latin

exhortation at the end of this ode, ‘*Carpe Diem*’ – literally, ‘pluck the day’, but more often translated as ‘seize the day’. Were he living in the present time he might simply have said ‘let’s go for it’.

There is, of course, a sense in Horace’s ode – some might describe it as an elaborate chat-up line aimed at the evidently very pretty young Leuconoë – of irresponsibility: forget about tomorrow, think only of today. But *carpe diem* is really all about recognising opportunities when they are presented and taking them, rather than letting them simply slip by. We can think about the future, even put trust in it, but still make the most use of the opportunities afforded by the present.

It was against the rather unusual (for SIRC at least) Classics background that we carefully selected people from our extensive panel of focus group participants to be our initial guinea pigs. This, we felt, would start to give us insights into the extent to which people in general are opportunity-seekers and takers – the areas of their lives in which such opportunities are mostly seized and where, perhaps, they are either avoided or passed over.

This time, however, our participants would not only have to contribute to congenial discussions – they would have to go off and *do* something as well. They would create their own personal ‘*carpe diem*s’ and report back a week later on the opportunities they had taken and what the results had been. The aim here was to see whether people could become more opportunity-taking than they normally were, and how

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<sup>1</sup> The full report of this study can be downloaded from <http://www.sirc.org/publik/optimism.shtml>

this might influence what they did in both the short- and long-term future. In essence – a small-scale social experiment.

While the people we involve in focus groups come from a wide range of social backgrounds, professions and ages, they are not, of course, necessarily representative of the country as a whole. Following the first group meeting, therefore, we developed a set of questions that reflected the main themes arising in the discussions. These were administered online by YouGov to a nationally representative sample of 2,066 people across Britain.

The contributions of the group participants and their accounts of the opportunities they decided to seek out and to take are summarised in the following sections of this report along with key findings from the national survey.

## 2 Cautious Britain?

### 2.1 Taking opportunities – or leaving them

In our first group session we explored the extent to which the participants had seized opportunities in any area of their lives, or had let them pass by. There were some, such as Rai, who were clearly ‘go for it’ types:

*“I am hard-pressed to think of an opportunity that I haven’t taken ... Anything that enhances my personal life I think I try.”*

A somewhat older Mary also felt that she fitted into this category:

*“I have done a lot in my life and I feel like I have achieved a lot and I have had lots of opportunities and I have taken them.”*

On the other side, however, Matt summed up the more general consensus in the room with a rather dull response:

*“I take some opportunities and turn some down.”*

Our national poll responses reflected this ‘take some, leave some’ approach to life. The largest proportion (60%) said that they had taken some of the opportunities that had been presented to them in life while a much smaller number (21%) had seized most or all of their opportunities. Those feeling that they had taken few or none of the opportunities accounted for 15% of the sample.

#### **1 in 7 of the British population has seized few or none of the opportunities handed to them in life**

What we have here is, perhaps, a reflection of typically British caution. We shouldn’t rush into things too often – we should wait and see. By which time, of course, many of the opportunities have passed us by.

Sometimes, of course, we turn down opportunities because we think that something better might come along. Laura gave us an example of such an approach in her working life:

*“I had the opportunity to go back to the same job and it was looking pretty likely that I would become head of the*

*department ... I took the opportunity not to because I was hopeful for something better.”*

The idea of taking the opportunity to not take an opportunity is certainly an interesting one.

Lorna had rejected work opportunities for different reasons:

*“I had friends who were trying to put a word in at their work and get me a job in quite a good businesses ... I chose not to do that though because I thought if I did do that, I would become a certain type of person which I wouldn’t necessarily want to be.”*

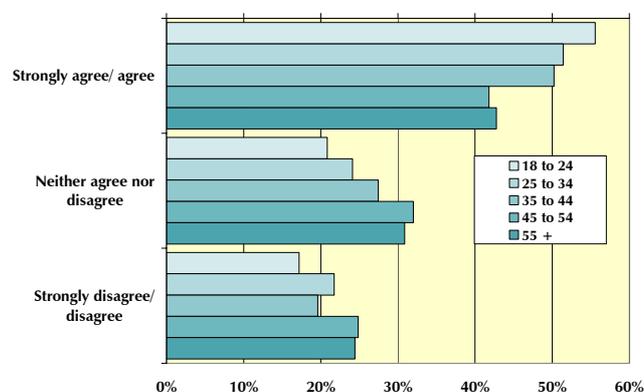
In our national poll the proportion of people saying that that they had seized few or none of the opportunities at work constituted 21% of the sample.

#### **A fifth of British people have let most or all of the opportunities in their working lives slip by**

### 2.2 Seeking opportunities at work

There is, of course, a difference between simply taking up work opportunities when they are presented and actively seeking them out. We asked our poll respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I have actively sought out new opportunities in my working life rather than just waiting for them to happen.” We can see from Figure 1 that while there are differences between the age groups, less than half of all respondents (47%) said that they had sought such opportunities, a sizeable 22% said that they had not.

**Figure 1. Agreement about actively seeking work opportunities – by age**



**Nearly a quarter of us have not actively sought out work/career opportunities**

We can also see from Figure 1 that it is the youngest group (under 25s) who are most active in this context – 56% of them have sought out work and career opportunities compared with 43% of those aged over 55.

In our group, Mary was a good example of this lack of active opportunity seeking in her career:

*“I have always just wandered into jobs. I just went from one catering job to another ... I never planned ... that ever really”*

There was a general consensus within the group that younger generations now have to be more proactive.

**2.3 Seeking social opportunities**

When it came to discussion of social opportunities, some members of our group were rather more upbeat. Jim, for example, said:

*“In terms of going places, talking to new people, drinks ... I’m very into that sort of thing.”*

Steve, a well-known social adventurer, commented with typically British understatement:

*“I am not adverse to doing things like that; striking up conversations ...”*

In our national poll, however, while there were some like Jim and Steve, only 13% said they usually or always sought out and seized opportunities to meet new people or make new friends. Twice as many (26%) said that they rarely or never took this kind of social opportunity.

**A quarter of the British population mostly rejects opportunities to make new friends**

**2.4 Routine lives?**

Given this distinct lack of opportunity-taking evident among the British population it is not surprising that nearly 30% of us feel that while our lives are pretty routine, we’re quite happy with that.

A couple of people in our group represented this section of society. Lorna was one of them:

*“I always get the same train and I always get a coffee before ... and it’s at the same station, get on the same tube and go the same route.”*

Tony reflected on his past life:

*“I worked a long time in the same place and I just got into the same pattern of meeting the same people, eating the same food.”*

**Nearly a third of us lead routine lives – but we’re happy with that**

There were, however, some slightly more optimistic signs in the poll data. Just over a third of respondents (34%) felt that they would like a bit more variety in their otherwise routine lives – but only a quarter of those aged over 55 felt this way.

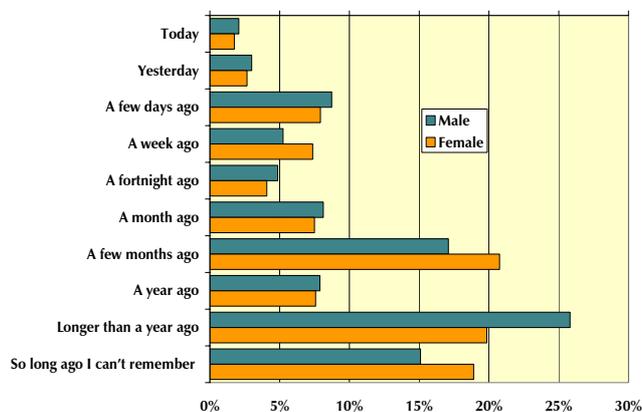
**2.5 Recalling doing something different**

Given this wish for a bit more variety, when did people last actually do something that was genuinely new and different? Our group was a bit stumped by this question. Julie spoke for them all:

*“I am struggling to think of an opportunity [like that] that I have taken lately.”*

Judging by our poll results most people have not done anything new for a while. We can see from Figure 2 that for the largest group (23%) it was longer than a year ago.

**Figure 2. Time since last doing something new – by gender**



For the third largest group (17%) it was so long ago that they couldn't actually remember.

**Most people in Britain haven't done anything new for months or years**

**2.6 The benefits of change**

Among those for whom this kind of opportunity-taking was within living memory, however, the impact seems to have been quite positive. Only 4% said that regretted what they had done while a third of the sample reported that it had resulted in a long-lasting positive effect. A fifth also said that their experience had made them more likely to seize opportunities in the future.

Interestingly, over a quarter of respondents (26%) said that others had benefited from the opportunity that they had last seized as well as themselves.

We will see in Section 3 that quite similar positive impacts were evident among people in our group after they had returned from their week-long quest to do something different.

**2.7 Change what?**

The poll also showed that while a majority (61%) were happy to take opportunities to change their daily routines, although probably not very recently, they were not prepared to make changes that might affect their long-term futures. A number of people in the group felt the same way, pointing out that seizing opportunities was most often about the here and now rather than the long-term future. Di, for example, said:

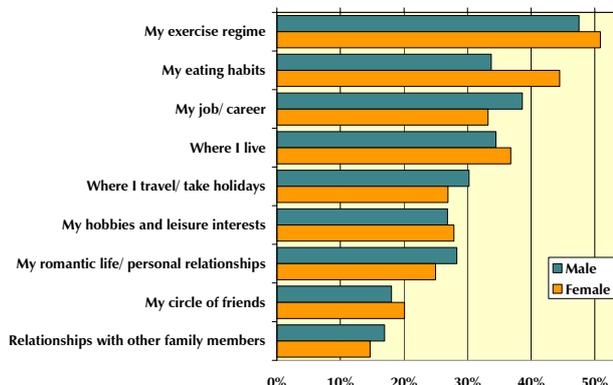
*"I don't really do something because it will lead to something else. I think I just don't look that far enough in advance ... I just do things in the moment."*

This short-term rather than long-term opportunity-taking was reflected in the specific types of change that the poll respondents would make in their lives, as summarised in Figure 3.

Top of the poll came exercise and eating habits – especially for women. Rather oddly, respondents were more ready to take an opportunity to change aspects of the working life or where they lived than they were to vary where they went on holiday or

their hobbies. One's social circle and family relationships were not aspects of life where opportunity for change was welcomed.

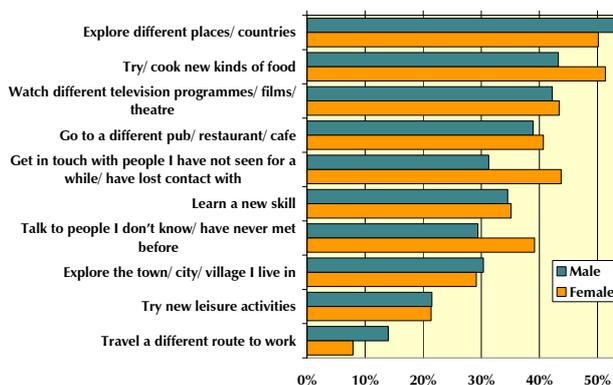
**Figure 3. Areas of life for making changes – by gender**



**Brits would most like an opportunity to change their exercise regime and diet**

Despite the fact that making changes in where they went on holiday was low on respondents' priority list, exploring new places and countries was reported as the most frequently taken opportunity, as summarised in Figure 4. Perhaps they felt that their holidays were already sufficiently varied and needed no further opportunity-seizing.

**Figure 4. Areas in which opportunities have been taken - by gender**



We can also see for Figure 4 that cooking and eating different types of food, perhaps as a result of all those foreign holidays, came second on the list. Relatively few, however, had taken the opportunity to explore their own home town or even vary their route to work – perhaps the most simple changes to routine that anyone could make.

Quite a few (38%) of the poll respondents had also chosen to get in touch with people with whom they had lost contact. As

we will see later in Section 3, this was what a number in our group also chose for their task in the week following the first meeting.

## 2.8 Life-changing opportunities

While there is evidently an aversion to seizing opportunities that might have far reaching consequences, most of us have to make life-changing decisions at some point in time. Most of our group members, however, seemed to have erred on the safe side on these occasions. Jim was a good example:

*"I took a sabbatical to Australia for four months and then they said that I should stay for another year. But I would have had to quit my job at home ... I was tempted but I didn't take it, and I don't regret it."*

When we look back on such opportunities, of course, we may sometimes feel regret for missing the opportunity or we may thank goodness that we let it pass. As Mary said:

*"You don't always have to regret the opportunities that you don't take. You can think about how life might have been different but it doesn't mean you regret it, it just means that you realise life would have been different if you had taken a different path."*

In contrast Tony, who has recently returned to education as a mature student, said:

*"I didn't take the opportunity to go to University [when I was younger] and I should have done."*

In contrast with our group members, the largest proportion of poll respondents (43%) said that when they had been faced with a life-changing opportunity they had taken it and had no regrets. This compares with the 7% who regretted taking the opportunity. A further 7% had not taken the opportunity and regretted it, while 5% thought that by missing out on the opportunity they had made the right decision. Given the rather routine lives that many of us seem to lead it came as no surprise that 15% of respondents said that had never faced what they believed to be a potentially life-changing opportunity.

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**1 in 7 people have never been faced with a potentially life-changing decision**

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Given the reluctance to seize opportunities that we have seen characterises much of the British population, and the infrequent occasions on which we try something new and different, what is it that holds us back?

## 2.9 Letting opportunities pass

Some members of our group thought it was a matter of timing – they had to be ready for it. Jim, for example, said:

*"When an opportunity comes along that involves change and I am not ready for some sort of change then I am happy to pass it by."*

Lorna felt that she might resist seizing an opportunity simply because there might be something better on offer later:

*"... something else that suits you better might come along. It's optimistic to think there might be better options"*

In our poll, the largest group of respondents (57%) felt that they would be held back from seizing opportunities because of financial considerations. In these times of economic recession this, perhaps, sounds quite reasonable. Forty percent of respondents also said that they would need to think through the implications of the potential opportunity first – a 'sensible' approach as well.

Many were concerned about the effect that taking an opportunity might have on their families and partners. Others, however, were simply worried about looking silly (22%), they might regret it (21%) or that it was not in their character to seize opportunities (15%).

In this context a sizeable proportion (34%) of respondents felt that age was something that might be a factor that inhibits opportunity-taking. As we might expect, it was people over the age of 55 who mostly felt this way – 60%, compared with 8% of the under 25s.

## 2.10 Age and opportunity-taking

We explored this issue further with our group and in the national poll. Tony, in his mid forties, felt that he had become more adventurous as he had got older:

*"I tended to be a bit more reticent when I was younger ... I would say I have become more of a risk-taker, a bit of an opportunity taker."*

The considerably younger Laura (27) though that age brought with it confidence:

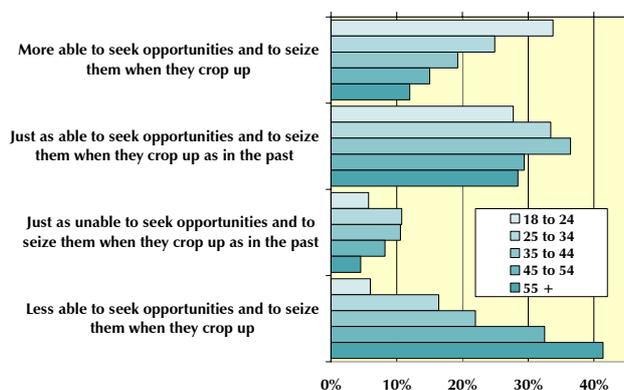
*"The older I have got the more opportunities I have taken and I think that is probably down to confidence."*

Fifty year old Julie, however, took a rather different view:

*"I am probably [now] a cautious opportunity taker. I think with age but more with experience and confidence you weigh up the risks a bit more."*

The poll results were similarly mixed, but interesting. We can see from Figure 5 that 31%, the largest group by a small margin, felt that age made little difference to their readiness to seek and to seize opportunities; 28% thought that age decreased their ability and for 19% ability increased with age. The interesting effects, however, are within these groups. Younger people feel that age affects them positively in this context while older people feel that it has the opposite effect.

**Figure 5. Response to 'As I get older I become?' – by age**



The switch in views about whether or not age increases one's ability to seek and to seize opportunities occurs within the 35-44 age bracket. Up to that point, we assume the increase in confidence and a degree of maturation are beneficial. After that, however, caution starts to prevail and we start to develop the kinds of excuse for not taking our chances that we noted above: 'it's too risky', 'I need to think it through first'.

## 2.11 Family responsibilities

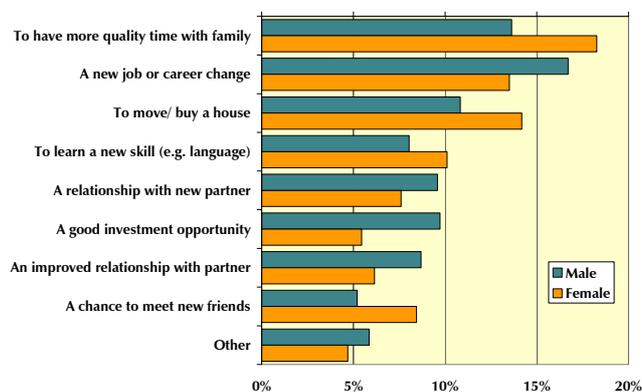
It is, of course, the case that by our mid to late thirties we have tended to take on more responsibilities, including getting married and having children. And as we have already seen, such concerns for family and partners are seen as one of the obstacles to opportunity-taking. We explored this issue a little further in the poll. For a fifth of respondents (21%) having a supportive family and partner was seen as making it easier to seize opportunities as they arose. They were outnumbered, however, by the 33% who said "I have to think more carefully when opportunities arise of the impact on my partner/ family." Only 3% agreed with the statement "I am happy to take opportunities regardless of their impact on my family/ partner."

We ended the first meeting with our group by getting them to identify an activity to be undertaken in the coming week that would involve doing something new or different and for which there was an easy opportunity. We did not expect anybody to engage in anything that was particularly life-changing such as quitting their job or leaving their spouse. Perhaps it was something that they had been wanting to do for some time, but had not got round to doing it for one reason or another. Or perhaps it would be something that had been inspired by the discussions in which they had just been involved. We will see later what they came up with and the effects that had on them.

## 2.12 Opportunities for the coming months

We presented our poll respondents with a similar task in the form of the question "Which one opportunity would you most like to take this summer?" Their responses are summarised in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Preferred opportunity this summer – by gender**



Here we can see that spending more quality time with their families was the most preferred option for women – a reminder, perhaps, of their modern-day pressured lives. For men, the opportunity for a change in job or career was the dominant wish – also, perhaps, a reflection of the level of dissatisfaction experienced in everyday, routine life.

While 9% of respondents were looking for a new partner, these were predominantly under the age of 25. The least popular option here, however, was to meet new people and make new friends.

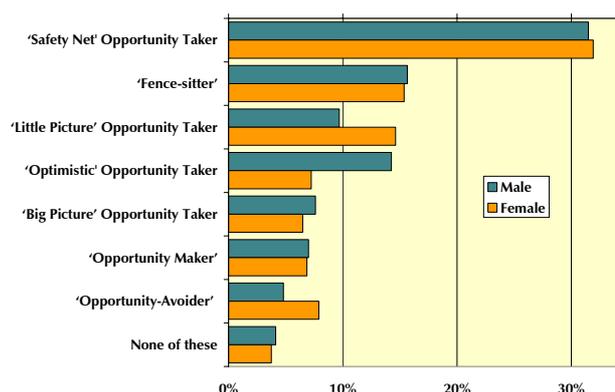
We gave respondents the option in this part of the questionnaire to provide free responses – they could write in the box an alternative opportunity they would like to pursue this summer. Some of these were quite interesting. One respondent wanted the opportunity to catch a big fish while another yearned to write a novel and get it published. Several wanted to get fitter – in line with the finding noted previously that changing one’s exercise regime seems to be a major priority for the British population. Another wanted a baby while several chose rather prosaic options such the opportunity to buy a mobility scooter, to make a reasonable living, to have more time away from work, and to ‘settle down’. Someone wanted the opportunity for love – another sought a narrow boat. Such is the variety of human ambition.

### 2.13 Types of opportunity-taker

On the basis of the group discussions we had thought about how we might best define and classify people in terms of their readiness to seek and to seize opportunities. How could they best be described? What ‘labels’ might our poll respondents attach to themselves, and how might this allow insights into what being British is all about?

There are, of course, substantial risks in this approach. If you provide poll respondents with terms and definitions that are not appropriate you simply receive back a large number of ticks in the ‘None of these’ box. Fortunately, taking our steer from the contributions of our group participants, we seem to have got it right, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Opportunity-taking types – by gender



We can see from Figure 7. that the most popular choice (32% of respondents) was the ‘Safety Net’ type of opportunity taker – people who are comfortable seizing opportunities but only when they know that they have a financial/social/emotional back-up in case things go wrong. In the absence of such safety-nets, they will let opportunities pass by or actively avoid them.

The second group (15%) are aptly described as ‘Fence-Sitters’ – people who want to wait and see what will happen, rather than seizing immediately opportunities that present themselves. As a result, of course, the opportunities have often disappeared in the meantime.

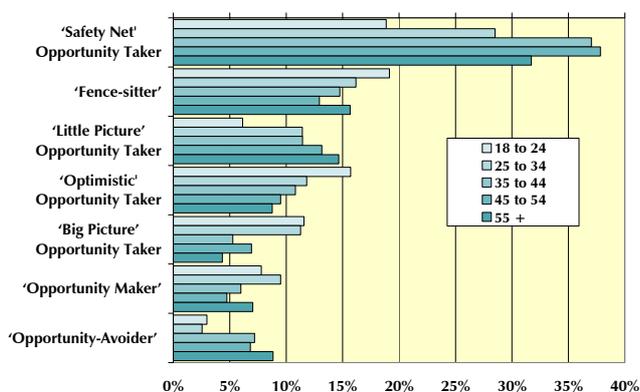
The following group of ‘Little Picture’ opportunity takers (12% of the sample) constitutes those who are comfortable seizing opportunities that change, say, their daily routine, but are less comfortable with changes on a bigger scale. Such larger scale and potentially life-changing decisions are left to the much smaller group (7%) of ‘Big-Picture’ opportunity takers. In between these groups lie the ‘Optimistic’ opportunity takers – those up-beat individuals who believe that the outcomes of seizing opportunities will always be good.

‘Opportunity Makers’ – those who prefer to create their own opportunities, rather than just waiting for them to crop up – are one of the smallest groups, only marginally larger than the ‘Opportunity-Avoiders’, whose label is self-descriptive.

We can see from Figure 7 that there are some interesting gender differences in this context. Men are nearly twice as likely to describe themselves as ‘optimistic’ opportunity-takers than women. Women are more represented than men in the ‘Little

Picture’ and ‘Opportunity-Avoider’ groups. The data also reveal some age differences as well, as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8. Opportunity-taking types – by age**



Here we can see that the ‘Safety-Net’ and ‘Little-Picture’ types tend to be in the older age groups. Younger people are more likely than their older counterparts to feature in ‘Optimistic’ and ‘Big Picture’ groups, although they also feature prominently in the ‘Fence-Sitters’ as well. They are significantly under-represented, however, in the ‘Opportunity-Avoider’ groups.

We can interpret these and the other findings noted above in two ways. It may be simply the case that as we get older we become more cautious and risk-averse – more ‘settled in our ways’ and content with our routines. On the other hand, it could be that younger people under the age of 35 have grown up in a harder economic climate than those in the preceding generations and have, through necessity, been more obliged to seek out and seize opportunities whenever they are presented in their lives.

## 2.14 Summary

From what we have seen in this section of the report, we British are a pretty unadventurous lot. Nearly half of us haven’t done anything new or different for over a year – in some cases so long ago that we can’t actually remember when, or what perhaps. One in seven of us say that we have failed to seize any or only a few of the opportunities that have come our way. In our working lives one in five of us have let all or most of the opportunities slip away.

Not only do many of us let opportunities pass by, less than half of us have actively sought out work opportunities while less

than one in eight of us actively seek opportunities to improve our social lives – What a depressing picture!

We are, it seems, a nation of people who prefer routines to change, however risk-free or relatively minor such changes might be. We need, in many cases, a safety net before we can even contemplate seizing an opportunity, or we prefer just to sit on the fence, perhaps watching the opportunities slip quietly away.

And yet, when we do seize an opportunity, we feel better for it. In many cases it can have a long-lasting, positive impact, not only to us as individuals but in a quarter of cases to other people around us as well. This was particularly evident among those who participated in our ‘social experiment’. Their experiences are summarised in the next section.

### 3 Personal 'carpe diems'

Our group returned a week later to report on what they had done in the way of seizing opportunities and what the impacts had been.

Steve had undertaken an open-top tourist bus trip around Oxford – something that is almost unheard of for a local to do.

*"I decided to go on the bus tour because I have lived round this area for a long time and I thought I would strike up a conversation with someone. But I faced a setback as I didn't realise that they provided you with headsets and nobody would actually be having a conversation, because they would be listening to the running commentary! But, these two Americans of about 50 plus got on the bus and ironically, we got talking about the headphones."*

He went on to describe how, at the end of the tour, the Americans invited him to join them for a drink and fill them in on some of the local knowledge. As a result, he now has a place to stay whenever he visits the United States.

Mary had sought out the opportunity to get rid of some stress and engage in what she described as 'frivolity':

*"I got in touch with people who I had not been in touch with for ages, one of which is a very free spirited person and who since I was last in touch with them has travelled all over the world ... It reminded me of a time in my life when I was a lot freer. I also just did stuff like got a friend to come round and help me clean out my wardrobe, I drank wine with other friends ... just things that I really don't do anymore ... and it was great. It made me realise that my life for the past few years has been so busy and hectic with school and my son, the stress has really taken its toll and I have wound myself so tight. I found it really hard to unwind myself to the point that I managed to. I did do it but I was so aware of it and so today I had a really busy and stressful day doing various things like giving my husband the car that he really needed ... normally that would mean that I would have a nervous breakdown by the end of the day, but I didn't. I went into the school and spoke to the headmistress again ... Then when my husband was phoning and making*

*demands about his football gear, I thought how normally I would have been having a nervous breakdown, but I didn't because I had a bit more of a frivolous week."*

As with Steve, Mary's opportunity-taking had very immediate and tangible rewards. We will see shortly that for some of our participants the impacts may be quite enduring.

Meanwhile, Lorna recounted her recent trip to London:

*"I had a mission of stopping and looking at what was around me and enjoying the environment that I was in, instead of rushing to the next place that I have to be. So I was up in Whitehall the other day and it was a really sunny day so I thought, 'I'm not going to go straight in, I am going to jump back on the tube and go [somewhere else] and have a wander round and enjoy the nice sunny day."*

She then gave a detailed description of where she went and what she did. Lorna had also been, as part of her job, to Birmingham:

*"I did the same in Birmingham today. Instead of avoiding people, which is what I normally do, I went up and spoke to the people that give away lots of free stuff. I took the opportunity to go up and talk to them. I found it really lifted my mood, taking that little bit of extra notice."*

Tony had set himself the task of talking with street drinkers, Big Issue sellers and others living on the margins of society:

*"Yes I spoke to a few people in those circumstances and the thing that struck me is that everything in their life is an opportunity ... but it has to be because they are living on the edge. One guy came up to me and asked me for money and I stuck my hand out and asked him his name ... he was just telling me about how he lives in his tent in Port Meadow ... he had put it up on a floor so that it didn't flood and various other things ... I did actually get invited down for ... an all weekend party! Me, James and the rats! The guy was probably only in his early twenties."*

Through this activity Tony had start to think more about his own life:

*"I have gone through this period in the last six months or a year where I felt a bit sorry for myself. It made me feel like I have seized some opportunities and I do make my own way ..."*

Laura had decided to re-establish contact with an old friend – something that we saw earlier is what a number of poll respondents would like to do. During the week between the group meetings, however, she had received a request from her mother to speak to the residents of a rather up-market retirement home – the kind of place that has visiting speakers every month.

*"I actually got the email straight after [the previous group meeting] so I said yes. And it's kind of good in a way because I am really excited; I get to go over again what I did [on a long trip to Thailand] and think about how I feel about it and go through all the photographs and pick out the best bits and stuff. She thinks they will want to hear about it, so that's good."*

Laura was, however, anxious about the "the speaking thing", even though, as another member of the group pointed out, she is a school teacher:

*"Yes, but I don't really like to stand up and talk to people that listen! This is probably the most public I have ever been."*

What was clear in Laura's case is that had she not been in our group talking about seizing opportunities prior to her mother's invitation she would, undoubtedly have turned it down.

The same was true for Di who changed her plans for the week:

*"I decided to seize another opportunity instead. I do baking and stuff for various friends and what have you, and ... somebody ... said that they were getting married in July and asked if I would do their wedding cake. I said yes as I thought that was an opportunity to take ... So I am doing that. We have met up and she seems very ... I've just got to get through the day now."*

We asked Di if her acceptance of this request was unusual.

*"Yes, I think I would have said no but I could find someone to do it for you. I have been baking cakes for a while now, but not for a wedding!"*

For Di, accepting this request involved a degree of risk – something that she would normally avoid. By accepting this rather challenging opportunity, however, she felt that she had proved something to herself.

In contrast to these 'success' stories Matt, who the previous week had decided to learn to ride a bicycle, recounted a tale of initial failure:

*"This is an opportunity I have tried to take many times and I tried again and it's really never, ever going to happen!"*

Rai, who had accompanied him on this occasion, came to his defence:

*"He did move some distance with his feet on the pedals! There was movement and pedalling. ..."*

Having given up on the bike, Matt described how he took the opportunity to accompany friends on a punting trip. Since punting is, for him, both a regular and lazy activity, other members of the group were unimpressed. On this occasion, however, there was something different. On the trip he met up with an old acquaintance:

*"I took the opportunity to get past the usual banter and we ended up chatting for the whole evening and we got to know each other really well. It went beyond just chit chat and banter to an actual heart to heart ... I thought, 'actually no; I am going to make a conscious effort with this person, I am not just going to prat around and thrive on the banter, I am going to make an effort' ... It's a friendship formed, consolidated."*

Jim had decided to introduce a little variation into his routine working day:

*"Well, the department that I work in, there is this culture where people don't take a lunch break and they just soldier on through the day. But Headington is 15 minutes away so when you walk there and walk back, it's ... half an hour, and so I decided to have an hour and a half lunch break and*

*just come in earlier. It has had a knock on effect as I am now getting up earlier this week ... So I have been into Headington, had coffees, walked round and just generally chilled out; got rid of the feeling that you are just trying to get through the day. I mean, even if you like your job, you are just looking at your watch, waiting to go home and just rushing through the day, which is a horrible way to be...and getting up earlier has been great because I am sleeping a lot better, even though I have been in bed for less time."*

Mary observed: "You feel differently don't you, much more relaxed" and this was very evident in Jim's demeanour. A very simple, conscious change of routine had brought many benefits.

Rai reminded us that her personal 'carpe diem' exercise was:

*"... to cook a meal from scratch ... which upon reflection was quite a radical thing to do. I mean, I can cook but I don't and I have wanted to for a long time. Originally, I was going to cook a bigish meal and then I thought, because the idea of this is at least partly ... to incorporate something in your life at least once. You can't cook a big meal for friends every week so I thought that I would just cook for myself. And it was miserable. I gave it a really good shot and I separated the vegetables and I made a good sauce and it was nice but it made me realise or remember why I don't cook for myself ... it just makes me late for everything else that I want to do that evening. It actually became a bit of a chore and I couldn't do the things I wanted to do so really there is a sort of balance in my life where I think, 'yeah, I might eat haphazardly and badly', but that is sort of the way I have chosen to be because it gives me the opportunity to do other things that I want to do. I did try!"*

To make up for what she saw as both a personal and public failure, Rai had got in touch with her mother and asking her:

*"... if she would like to spend her mother's birthday with me ... her mother passed away a few years ago. It meant that we could do mother daughter things and it felt like something that I would have liked somebody to ask me. But it was a risk in the sense that I didn't know whether she was going to be at that stage of the grieving process to want to*

*commemorate, or maybe it would be too raw. But I was glad that I did that because she said yes and we are going to spend the day together."*

Julie had, sadly, fallen ill in the intervening week, but had emailed to say that after the first group meeting she was still determined to look for opportunities in her life and was now a lot more motivated to seize them. She had undertaken her task, which was to re-establish contact with her father, and wrote:

*"I did make the call to my Dad and it wasn't quite as bad as I feared, though very stilted. I think the bridge is on its way to being built and I did feel good afterwards about taking the step. I've also seized the day in agreeing to a cheap weekend away with some girl friends, even though I haven't a bean at the moment – but ... you never know what's around the corner so go for it!"*

In the group we returned to discussion of opportunities in the past that we might have let pass or even avoided. There was, however, little in the way of regret. Yes, we had all missed opportunities for one reason or another, but the consensus was that you had to put these behind you – to move on. Had the 'carpe diem' exercise in which they had been involved helped in any way – perhaps more able to see opportunities when they arise and seize them? Two members of the group summed up nicely the general feeling. Matt, despite his failure to master the simple art of cycling, said:

*"I found it a really interesting week and I have been really aware of it. I have been telling everyone about it as well! What has made it interesting is being aware of all the opportunities I do have everyday and looking at the ones I normally turn down and actually doing some of them. Yes, it has produced some mixed results, but just highlighting it and challenging it for a change did make me focus on some things that I will experience again."*

Steve followed him by saying:

*"What it has done for me is [realise] we can go through life just going through the motions .. it did remind me that we can stop going through the motions, and you can focus on doing things in more depth; finding out about individuals*

*more deeply and focusing more can only be a positive thing."*

## 4 Conclusion

There is a very simple and short conclusion to be drawn from the *Carpe Diem* study. Most of us are locked inside routine lives. We resist change and, as a result, let opportunities in all aspects of our lives simply slip by. Not only do most of us fail to seize many of the opportunities that present themselves, even fewer of us actively seek them out.

And yet, as our modest social experiment has demonstrated, if we make ourselves think about doing something different for a change – force ourselves to review the range of opportunities that are easily available to us – and resolve to break just one small aspect of our routines, the results are immediately positive. We start to realise how easy it is to stop just ‘going through the motions’ and expand the range of everyday life experiences.

The only way to test whether this conclusion is justified or not is to try it out yourself – do as our participants did and seize just one small opportunity to do something a bit different. Below are a few suggestions – but I’m sure that you will have better ones.

## 5 Opportunity-Taking Tips

Let's admit it – most of us live quite routine lives. And we have seen from the Opportunity-Seizing study that while some of us are quite content with that, rather more of us would welcome some variety – nothing too dramatic or risky, perhaps, but something that would make a change, for the better.

So what holds us back? The excuse that 'I don't have the time or the opportunity' is, frankly, feeble. There are countless opportunities that don't require any extra time – we need to learn how to take them, even seemingly trivial ones, and more often.

We learned a lot from the group who participated in our Carpe Diem 'experiment' and, I think, they learned a lot about themselves. They are still talking about it. So, following their lead, let's look at the types of opportunity we all have, and then at how little it takes to go for them.

A number of our participants chose to seize social opportunities, getting back in touch with people with whom they had lost contact or establishing a new and rewarding relationship – an easy task to start with. Who haven't we seen for a long while? How much effort would it take simply to give them a call, send an email, or even write a proper letter. And what about the lady who lives three doors down from you but whose name you don't know, even though you see her most days? A simple smile and 'hello', or even introduce yourself. OK, it's not very 'British' – but it might be rewarding.

Just as simple is to vary the daily routine. Many people travel to work through areas that are unexplored. Hopping off the bus mid-way, or simply one stop short of the destination, is an easy way of breaking up that routine. So too is doing something different for a change during the lunch break or after work – even just a walk in the park. That's what parks are for.

Our patterns of leisure also tend to become a bit 'same old' after a while – the same pub, the same restaurant, the same cinema ... At this time of year, though, the weekend newspapers are full of special sections and pull-outs featuring things such *The Fifty Best Weekend Days Out* or *The Best Short Walks In Britain That End Up At A Pub*. Mostly, we skim over

these before chucking them in our recycling box. This time, look more carefully and, maybe, just take up one of the suggestions.

There are also all those 'What's On' boards that clutter up public libraries and pub entrances. When was the last time we actually read through the assorted posters and leaflets, or even more unlikely, went to one of the events featured? Why not – there's certainly no lack of variety to be found here. And you could end up doing something quite unlikely, just for a change. Opera, ballet, a jazz night, open-air Shakespeare, even a Joan Baez gig, all feature on the boards in our neighbourhood. Then there are the similarly numerous announcements of short courses based in anything from a prestigious university department to the local village hall – languages, archaeology, pottery, you name it.

These kinds of opportunities are, of course, relatively trivial, but seizing them can have longer-term, positive impacts, as our group are discovering. The people in our poll also felt that having seized one opportunity they not only felt the benefits but were more likely to seize other opportunities as they came along. It creates a psychological state of mind – a readiness not only to spot opportunities but to go for them as well. So, talking to the lady down the road, taking a circular walk ending up with a pub lunch, or going to the opera for the first time ever will not, in themselves, change your life very much. But, they may create new habits with much more far-reaching consequences – the start of a new career, for example, simply because this time when you saw the job advertised, you actually did something about it.

In the SIRC office we have certainly been inspired by our group's dedication to the task we set them. My own personal project has been to justify the slightly pretentious title of Carpe Diem that we gave to the project. I am returning to learning Latin – something that largely passed me by at school – and have bought Henry Mount's brilliant *Amo, Amas And All That*, an excellent and entertaining way of getting in Latin for the first (or second, in my case) time. I'll still need a proper Latin primer to go with it, of course – but, one step at a time ...

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Dr Peter Marsh, Oxford 2009