

Taking the plunge

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As part of the IPA's ongoing exploration of *Self Reliance*, we are continuing to uncover surprising trends in and out of the workplace, both at home and abroad.

People are taking control of their lives like never before. And it touches all parts of their lives from one end of the spectrum (the more sedate employment revolution) to the other (a death-defying belief in themselves leading to increased risk-taking and little regard for authority).

WHAT IS YOUR BASE NUMBER?

If you have leapt, unattached, from a Building, Antenna, Span (for example, a bridge) and Earth (for example, a cliff) with nothing but a parachute (and possibly some toilet paper handy) then surely you have one. Sound crazy? In March this year, the 1,000th person actually registered for theirs. In a 'sport' that's only become popular in the last 30 years, it's not a bad effort. BASE-1 was awarded in 1981, which means that there has been an average of 42 registrations per year since then. Being an unregulated, in fact mostly illegal, hobby, it's hard to gauge participation rates, but it's estimated that there are over 3,000 people currently willing to see the road come towards them or watch a jagged cliff face fly by so badly that they will break the laws set in place to preserve their own lives to do so.

There are instances, however, where this kind of behaviour is permitted. Bridge Day 2004, held at the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia, where BASE jumps from the bridge

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are legal once a year, saw an increase in jumpers from the previous year by 13 per cent to about 450 in the one place. Perhaps these Einstein-inspired thrill-seekers are merely seeking to slow the ageing process by a good tenth of a picosecond or two (~ 0.000000000001 seconds)? This might be a nice advertisement for this year's International Year of Physics, but with modern life expectancy already soaring past 80 years, it does seem unlikely.

Passing the BASE jumpers on the way down are a different kind of adventurers on the way up. Everest summit numbers have climbed markedly over the last ten years. Without the special relativistic benefit of extending life for the frost-bitten daredevil, why then do we see the following in Figure 1?

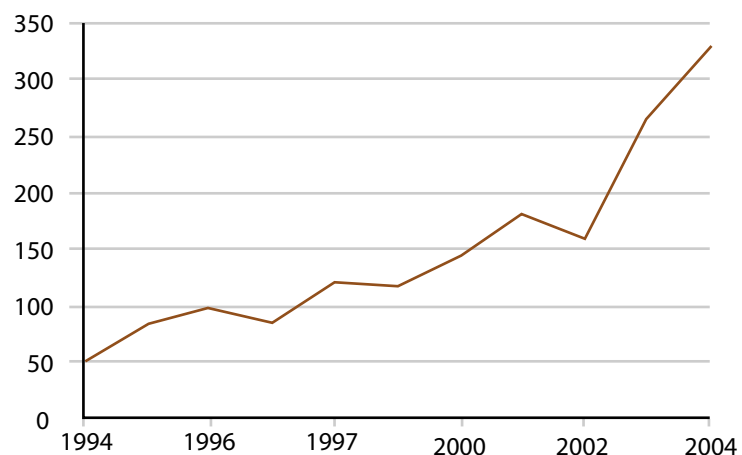
Surely this is simply explained by increased safety almost guaranteeing survival. While it is true that the odds of making it to the summit of Everest and back again are increasing, there were still 61 deaths in the period 1994–2004, a not insignificant 4 per cent, even more significant when we consider that fatal skydives occur at a rate of about one-thousandth of a per cent.

CONCLUSION

Is there, then, something special about being the 2,300th person to set foot on the highest point on Earth or, for that matter, being awarded BASE-1001? People are increasingly challenging themselves with activities which place their lives totally in their own hands and moving away from safer, more regulated activities. A less extreme display of this is shown by younger kids' increasing participation in extreme sports. These sports have less of a competitive feel about them, in many cases the only benefits come from the warm, fuzzy feeling one gets by beating one's previous best or just by improving one's skills. Another drawback for younger people is that their authority figures have little or no knowledge of what they're doing—they therefore feel completely independent. Such a feeling may lead some to even more gratifying anti-authority stunts in the future, or perhaps may simply lead others to choose different self-controlled ventures such as self-employment.

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Everest Summits, 1994-2004



Source: IPA

REVIEW