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ZHAW School of Management and Law

Downsizing Remains a Challenge for “Empty Nesters”

“Empty nesters” – people whose children no longer live at home – have the greatest potential for downsizing their living space. Nevertheless, this potential is only exploited to a limited extent. These are the findings of a study conducted by ZHAW in collaboration with the Federal Office for Housing (BWO), the Fédération Romande Immobilière, the Swiss Homeowners’ Association, and Raiffeisen Switzerland.

For 70 percent of those surveyed, downsizing is not an option. However, a willingness to downsize increases with age and the willingness to relocate. This is revealed by the representative study “The Use of Living Space from an Individual Perspective”, for which 1,097 people in German-speaking and French-speaking Switzerland were surveyed in spring 2024 about their use of living space.

No compromises on the number of rooms

In the survey, people willing to move were asked about their housing preferences and readiness to compromise. This group is least flexible concerning the number of rooms and housing costs – 42 percent do not want to deviate from their desired number of rooms and 32 percent do not want to deviate from their budgeted housing costs. Empty nesters, in particular, are the least flexible on these points. Nevertheless, half of the empty nesters surveyed would like to reduce the number of rooms when moving.

Empty nesters with their own homes have the greatest downsizing potential

At the same time, empty nesters belong to the group with the greatest potential for downsizing. Twenty-six percent feel that their home is too big, and 38 percent of empty nesters surveyed say they have more than two rooms they do not need. When empty nesters own their homes, the latter figure rises to 61 percent. In general, two more rooms than the number of people living in the household seems to be considered the ideal apartment/house size.

Little pressure to move if apartments are too large

However, empty nesters only make limited use of their downsizing potential. The pressure to move is less when apartments are too large than when they are too small. Social pressure is also in short supply, with only one in three people surveyed thinking that older couples or single people in larger apartments should give up their living space to make way for younger families. In addition, people who are willing to move into smaller apartments are discouraged from doing so by financial deterrents. The new rent for smaller apartments, for example, can often be higher than the existing rent for a larger apartment where you have been living for a long time. “It seems that the combination of



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relocating and downsizing – two huge life events happening at the same time – is particularly challenging,” explains Selina Lehner, Co-Head of the Study. “If the necessary incentives are also missing, a decision to move is often postponed.”

An office at home is becoming increasingly indispensable

A place to work withing the home setting is fast becoming indispensable, and 61 percent of those surveyed expressed a wish to have their own office at home. “There should be plenty of multi-use spaces on your own premises – an external office outside your own four walls is a less attractive option,” says Holger Hohgardt, Co-Head of the Study. An office at home also has an important function after retirement. In comparison, less than 15 percent of respondents listed a dressing room or playroom as part of their current domestic arrangements.

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