
The Status Quo Isn't Working for Two-Career Couples



By Benjamin Kessler , Asia Editor & Digital Manager

Dual-career coupledness doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. But outdated talent management programmes often twist it into one.

Statistics suggest that the dual-career lifestyle is well on its way to dominance, at least among the professional classes. Fifty-seven percent of full-time employees in the United States have a **spouse or partner** who also works full-time; if you only count millennials, the figure climbs to 78 percent. You could view this trend as laudable evidence of genuine social progress – gender equality in action. The prevailing view of dual careerism, though, is that it is a zero-sum game where, at best, both partners sustain their union by making killing compromises.

However, [Jennifer Petriglieri](#), INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, argues that the problem isn't baked into dual careerism itself. Decades-old talent management programmes – created to serve the needs of a mostly single-earner workforce – too often force painful choices on couples, rather than capitalising on the flexibility enabled by new technology. Over the past several years, she has studied more than 200 dual-career couples at the executive level, and conducted interviews with HR

leaders at 32 large companies. Petriglieri's recent article in [*Harvard Business Review*](#) encapsulates some of her research insights about why the status quo isn't working for today's relatively egalitarian couples, and how organisations can better serve (and ultimately retain) their priceless executive talents.

The traditional career ladder

Upon being offered a career-enhancing opportunity, such as a promotion or coveted overseas assignment, it is customary for a rising talent to say they must discuss it with their partner.

What too many companies miss, however, is that for members of dual-career couples, this discussion is no mere formality. In addition to two sets of career priorities, couples must consider childcare, schooling, housework, extended family and all the rest of the delicately interwoven threads that constitute a lifestyle co-managed on equal terms.

Companies run roughshod over that intricate webwork when, for example, they demand that everyone on the senior-leadership track switch roles every three years, or impose inflexible rotation programmes that uproot managers and their families several times in quick succession. Equally disruptive are the exploding offers often set before candidates, in which they are expected to leap into a new role – often in another country – with negligible lead time.

It's not that today's dual-career professionals expect to stay in one place and have all the opportunities come to them. "They know they need to be mobile, and in many cases, they want to be mobile," Petriglieri says. "But they can't just go at the drop of a hat."

Unfortunately, Petriglieri's interviewees recounted many stories of valuable dual-career talents missing out on roles – and, by extension, organisations missing out on their contributions in those roles – because their reluctance to start immediately was taken for a lack of drive or commitment.

Ironically, talent managers who act this way could be more credibly accused of being non-committal. They hand out opportunities on a first-come, first-served basis, instead of doing everything within reason to ensure that the right people receive acknowledgement and advancement.

If they were more patient and obliging with dual careers, they would very likely see fewer costly failures in expat assignments. "When we look at the

research on international moves, in particular, there's a very high failure rate," Petriglieri says. "And the reason often is, that the partner is unhappy. But the great thing about a dual-career couple is, if they both have opportunities to move to a certain place, it's much more likely to work out."

Stigmatisation of flexi-work

In the 20th century, you could always spot, even from the parking lot, a manager who had their eye on higher things: Theirs would be the only office lit up in the dead of night. The arrival of the internet and mobile devices removed the need for ambitious talents to plant themselves at the office. Midnight oil can just as easily be burnt at home, after putting the kids to bed.

Globalisation has further expanded the definition of the workplace. When conducting a tele-conference with your colleagues in China, it makes little difference whether you're calling from a meeting room or your kitchen table.

Yet despite the widespread adoption of flexible working policies, as well as research showing that flexi-work yields equal or better results, a stigma surrounds those who take advantage of it. Those late-night office-dwellers from the 1980s, after all, are now running the show. Having taken a certain path to the top, they expect younger generations to do the same - which would be eminently reasonable, but for all the ways the world has changed in the last three decades.

Attracting and retaining dual-career professionals

Petriglieri has a clear idea of what talent management programmes should do differently. First, they should drop their fixation on employees' physical mobility, concentrating instead on the desired end result: the acquisition of all-important skills and networks. Sometimes packing up and moving is necessary to attain this result, but not always. For example, Petriglieri describes how one dual-career executive gained familiarity with the Chinese market by swapping roles with a China-based peer for six weeks. Afterwards, she and her Chinese counterpart closely collaborated on a six-month strategic project. It was the best of both worlds: She got the needed expertise without her family having to commit to a prolonged stay abroad.

Even unavoidable moves can be made easier for those with dual-career arrangements. The help offered to mobile executives' spouses and partners is usually geared towards the needs of homemakers or job-holders rather than professionals. Social orientation and cultural adaptation are commonly

provided; career-wise, partners are left to fend for themselves. Petriglieri recommends resources such as the [International Dual Career Network](#), which matches mobile employees' partners with available positions within a global corporate network. Best of all, companies can join the network at no cost.

Erasing the stigma around flexi-work entails cultural revision that would be difficult to accomplish without support from the top. The generation gap is a significant obstacle to winning such support. Having come of age in the era of the single earner, baby-boomers could stand to learn more about the needs and aspirations of millennials and Generation Y. Reverse mentoring partnerships could help foster education and empathy.

Of course, the best chance for bringing about real change occurs when senior leaders alter their working habits as well as their attitudes. Behaviours shed their stigma when influential and powerful people model them. Petriglieri has seen this first-hand. "I was talking to one of our alumni who worked in a construction firm – very male-dominated, hard-nosed, you might say. And they looked at persuading some of these successful men to adopt some of these flexible working policies... And suddenly the whole organisation is mirroring that," she says.

Mutual advantage

Senior managers who are willing to broaden their thinking about dual careerism and update some long-standing norms are likely to soon find themselves in higher demand among rising leaders. You can extend that logic to the organisation as a whole. Earning a reputation for being dual-career friendly can only aid companies in the increasingly competitive global war for talent.

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