



What the Happiest Two-Career Couples Are Doing Differently



By , Asia Editor & Digital Manager

The conventional wisdom urging compromise and self-sacrifice leads many dual-career couples astray.

The currently prevailing pessimism about the viability of dual-career couples may dishearten the romantic in us, but it has some basis in reality. Even for single people and sole breadwinners, work-life balance can sometimes **feel like an impossibility**. Two people staggering in search of their own equilibrium can easily step on each other's toes, if not knock each other down. On the other hand, they could theoretically help each other find more solid footing than either could achieve alone.

The optimistic quest for a shared, equal foothold helps explain why the dual-career model, with all its difficulties, is **on its way to becoming the dominant form of coupledness**. But is this egalitarian dream doomed to fail nonetheless?

Jennifer Petriglieri, INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, cautions against despair. Her research with two-career couples has found that many of the most vexing problems they face are imposed rather than inherent. Individuals and organisations can take steps to solve them. First, companies should re-examine **outdated workplace expectations** that often force needless, no-win choices on employees – as when a manager is asked to uproot their family at short notice to take an overseas assignment that has just become available. Companies frequently fail to consider the damage that such a disruptive move could have on the manager’s spouse’s career.

Second, dual-career couples should question conventional wisdom about compromise being the key to healthy relationships. Emphasising compromise plays into a zero-sum logic that tends to generate resentment for one or both of the partners. In her recent article for **Administrative Science Quarterly** (co-authored by Otilia Obodaru of Rice University), Petriglieri argues that what defines success as a dual-career couple is not self-effacement for the relationship’s sake, but rather a combination of mutual support and vicarious ambition. Instead of thinking in terms of “you vs. me”, thriving dual-careers tend to view both their own career fulfilment and their partner’s as contributing to the overall good of “we”.

Attachment theory

Petriglieri and her co-author performed extensive interviews with 50 dual-career couples (100 interviews in all) about career and relationship issues. The interview subjects frequently remarked upon connections between their personal dynamics within the couple and their career evolution (or lack thereof) – which inspired the academics to select attachment theory as a lens for analysing the results.

Developmental psychologists use attachment theory to explore how foundational relationships – especially parent-child relationships – influence our identities as individuals. The theory asserts that secure attachments to loved ones equip us to venture out into the world, safe in the knowledge that warm, trusting bonds will cushion us emotionally when we stumble. Insecure attachments leave us feeling overwhelmed and unprotected, fearful at the very prospect of taking risks.

Attachment theory can also apply to a romantic relationship that ripens over time. In healthy couples, partners evolve from providing a *safe haven* for one

another to being one another's *secure base*. In other words, the physical and emotional comfort both partners find in their relationship matures into a source of strength, ambition and courage in tackling life's challenges.

Unidirectional vs. bidirectional

However, Petriglieri points out that more than one attachment type can occur within the same relationship. It is entirely possible for one partner to serve as a secure base for the other, but not feel that support is reciprocated.

Petriglieri says the 50 couples included in the study were either unidirectional and bidirectional in their attachment structures. Within unidirectional couples, only one partner felt they had a secure base in the other, whereas the feeling was mutual with bidirectional couples. Bearing out the tenets of attachment theory, partners in unidirectional couples who felt they lacked a secure base reported less dynamic professional development. Their comments often betrayed a nagging suspicion of having settled for less – even, at times, suppressed resentment at their partner's more exciting career path, which their support helped to make possible.

For example, one interviewee whom the authors call Olga described how after experiencing a professional disappointment, her partner Olaf “was sympathetic initially, but he also said he didn't have time to talk about it. I felt very alone.” By contrast, Olaf attributed much of his professional rise to Olga's unwavering support. By his account, she was the “sanctuary” he could turn to when the stress of his high-flying, risk-taking career began to mount.

The unidirectional couples had come to believe in the zero-sum logic of sacrifice and compromise. When asked why she buoyed her partner's career aspirations while neglecting her own, one interviewee replied, “Well, you just have to make compromises, don't you, to make all of that work.”

Blending professional identities

Bidirectional couples regarded the convergence of career and romance quite differently. They trusted that their relationship was strong enough to handle two simultaneously developing careers. Moreover, these couples noted how their individual career trajectories intertwined and reinforced one another. Seeing their partner soar inspired them to new heights. As one professional said, “We feed off each other's development... Seeing him and his path was

important to me, it gave me the inspiration to rethink my direction. And that is when I really homed in on becoming the leader of the public relations of a firm.”

As the bidirectional couples’ professional identities grew together, they also began to merge. Each partner incorporated aspects of the other’s identity, creating professionally advantageous points of differentiation. One man spoke of how he had absorbed some key personality traits of his wife, a senior political advisor, into his own career in the advertising industry: “In some ways I’m not your classic advertising man, my clients have commented that I’m more discreet, I advise in the background rather than push myself in their faces ‘sell, sell, sell’. When I get those comments, I can see a piece of [my wife] the Special Advisor in me.”

Thus, bidirectional couples formed attachments that were expansive and individuating rather than self-limiting.

The good news

So, is the overall picture for dual-career couples optimistic or pessimistic? The numbers are encouraging: Of the 50 couples in Petriglieri’s study, 29 were bidirectional. This suggests the dual-career model is not nearly as impracticable as some traditionalists claim.

Still, a significant number were unidirectional. For such couples, it may yet be possible to reframe their relationship. Much of the cultural conversation about work-life balance hinges upon practical hurdles, e.g. housework sharing and childcare. But Petriglieri suggests these are merely surface-level manifestations of the underlying psychological arrangements between couples. To truly ease friction in dual-career relationships, partners need to engage in a deeper dialogue – and regularly renew it.

In an interview for *Harvard Business Review*’s [“Women at Work” podcast](#), Petriglieri hints at what this might look like. “Take the time every so often to have those pre-emptive conversations. What is it we’re aiming for individually and together? What is it that’s going to make us thrive? And what choices might we need to make to make that happen?” The important thing, she says, is not to wait for a crisis like an exploding job offer to ask the fundamental questions. Use fortuitous moments when life is relatively calm for a serious and compassionate check-in.

Jennifer Petriglieri is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. She teaches the High Impact Leadership Programme and also directs both the **Women Leaders Programme** and the **Management Acceleration Programme**, all part of INSEAD's suite of Executive Education programmes.

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