



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT R1905B
PUBLISHED IN HBR
SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2019

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Power Couples

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Successful
partnerships
sidestep
predictable traps
and master
three challenging
transitions.

How Dual- Career Couples Make It Work



Camille and Pierre met in their early forties after each one's marriage had ended. Both were deeply committed to their careers and to their new relationship. Camille, an accountant, had felt pressured by her ex-husband to slow her progress toward partnership at her firm. Pierre, a production manager at an automotive company, was embroiled in a bitter divorce from his wife, who had given up her career to accommodate the geographic moves that his required. (As with the other couples I've profiled in this article, these aren't their real names.) Bruised by their past experiences, they agreed to place their careers on an equal footing. Initially things went smoothly, but two years in, Camille began to feel trapped on a professional path that she realized she had chosen because "that was what the smart kids did."

Mindful of their pact, Pierre calmly listened to her doubts and encouraged her to explore alternatives. But as the months wore on, he began to feel

weighed down as he juggled providing emotional support to Camille, navigating their complex family logistics (both had children from their former marriages), and succeeding in his demanding job. When he began to question his own career direction, he wondered how the two of them could manage to change course. They couldn't afford to take time out from work, nor could they take much time to reflect and keep their family and relationship afloat. Frustrated and exhausted, both wondered how they could continue to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

Dual-earner couples are on the rise. According to Pew Research, in 63% of couples with children in the United States, for example, both partners work (this figure is slightly higher in the EU). Many of these are *dual-career couples*: Both partners are highly educated, work full-time in demanding professional or managerial jobs, and see themselves on an upward path in their roles. For these couples, as for Pierre and Camille, work is a primary source of identity and a primary channel for ambition. Evidence is mounting from sociological research that when both partners dedicate themselves to work and to home life, they reap benefits such as increased economic freedom, a more satisfying relationship, and a lower-than-average chance of divorce.

Because their working lives and personal lives are deeply intertwined, however, dual-career couples face unique challenges. How do they decide whose job to relocate for, when it's OK for one partner to make a risky career change, or who will leave work early to

Spotlight

pick up a sick child from school? How can they give family commitments—and each other—their full attention while both of them are working in demanding roles? And when one of them wants to undertake a professional reinvention, what does that mean for the other? They must work out these questions together, in a way that lets both thrive in love and work. If they don't, regrets and imbalances quickly build up, threatening to hinder their careers, dissolve their relationship, or both.

Many of these challenges are well recognized, and I've previously written in HBR about how companies can adapt their talent strategies to account for some of them (“Talent Management and the Dual-Career Couple,” May–June 2018). But for the couples themselves, little guidance is available. Most advice treats major career decisions as if one is flying solo, without a partner, children, or aging parents to consider. When it's for couples, it focuses on their relationship, not how that intersects with their professional dreams, or it addresses how to balance particular trade-offs, such as careers versus family, or how to prioritize partners' work travel. What couples need is a more comprehensive approach for managing the moments when commitments and aspirations clash.

My personal experience in a dual-career couple, and my realization that little systematic academic research had been done in this area, prompted a six-year investigation into the lives of more than 100 dual-career couples, resulting in my forthcoming book, *Couples That Work*. The people I studied come from around the world, range in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties, and represent a range of professions, from corporate executive to entrepreneur to worker in the nonprofit sector. (See the sidebar “About the Research.”) My research revealed that dual-career couples overcome their challenges by directly addressing deeper psychological and social forces—such as struggles for power and control; personal hopes, fears, and losses; and assumptions and cultural expectations about the roles partners should play in each other's lives and what it means to have a good relationship or career.

I also discovered that three transition points typically occur during dual-career couples' working and love lives, when those forces are particularly strong. It is during these transitions, I found, that some couples craft a way to thrive in love and work, while others are plagued by conflict and regret. By understanding each transition and knowing what questions to ask each other and what traps to avoid, dual-career couples can emerge

stronger, fulfilled in their relationships and in their careers.

TRANSITION 1

Working as a Couple

When Jamal and Emily met, in their late twenties, trade-offs were the last thing on their minds. They were full of energy, optimistic, and determined to live life to the fullest. Jamal, a project manager in a civil engineering firm, traveled extensively for work and was given increasingly complex projects to lead, while Emily, who worked at a clothing company, had just been promoted to her first management role. They saw each other mostly on weekends, which they often spent on wilderness hiking adventures. They married 18 months after their first date.

Then, in the space of three months, their world changed dramatically. While Emily was pregnant with their first child, Jamal's boss asked him to run a critical infrastructure project in Mexico. Jamal agreed to spend three weeks out of every month in Mexico City; designating some of his pay raise to extra child care would allow Emily to keep working in Houston, where they lived. But when their daughter, Aisha, was born two weeks early, Jamal was stuck in the Mexico City airport waiting for a flight home. Soon Emily, who

Idea in Brief

THE PROBLEM

When both members of a couple have demanding careers, their work and personal lives are deeply intertwined—and often at odds.

THE TRANSITIONS

Dual-career couples tend to go through three phases of being particularly vulnerable: when they first learn to work together as a couple; when they experience a midlife reinvention; and in the final stages of their working lives.

THE SOLUTION

Couples who communicate at each transition about values, boundaries, and fears have a good chance of being fulfilled both in their relationships and in their careers.



In the first transition that dual-career couples face, they must move from having parallel, independent careers and lives to having interdependent ones.

was single-handedly managing Aisha, her job, and their home, discovered that the additional child care wasn't enough; she felt overburdened and unappreciated. Jamal was exhausted by the relentless travel and the stress of the giant new project; he felt isolated, incompetent, and guilty.

After many arguments, they settled on what they hoped was a practical solution: Because Jamal earned more, Emily took a smaller project role that she could manage remotely, and she and Aisha joined him in Mexico. But Emily felt disconnected from her company's head office and was passed over for a promotion, and eventually she grew resentful of the arrangement. By the time Jamal's boss began talking about his next assignment, their fighting had become intense.

The first transition that dual-career couples must navigate often comes as a response to the first major life event they face together—typically a big career opportunity, the arrival of a child, or the merger of families from previous relationships. To adapt, the partners must negotiate how to prioritize their careers and divide family commitments. Doing so in a way that lets them both thrive requires an underlying shift: They must move from having parallel, independent careers and lives to having interdependent ones.

My research shows two common traps for couples negotiating their way through their first transition:

Concentrating exclusively on the practical. In the first transition in particular, couples often look for logistical solutions to their challenges, as Jamal and Emily did when they arranged for

extra child care and negotiated how many weekends Jamal would be home. This focus is understandable—such problems are tangible, and the underlying psychological and social tensions are murky and anxiety provoking—but it prolongs the struggle, because those tensions remain unresolved.

Instead of simply negotiating over calendars and to-do lists, couples must understand, share, and discuss the emotions, values, and fears underlying their decisions. Talking about feelings as well as practicalities can help them mitigate and manage them.

Basing decisions primarily on money. Many couples focus on economic gain as they decide where to live, whose career to prioritize, and who will do the majority of the child care. But as sensible (and sometimes unavoidable) as this is, it often means that their decisions end up at odds with their other values and desires.

Few people live for financial gain alone. In their careers they are also motivated by continual learning and being given greater responsibilities. Outside work, they want to spend time with their children and pursue personal interests. Couples may be attracted to a location because of proximity to extended family, the quality of life it affords, or their ability to build a strong community. Basing the decision to move to Mexico on Jamal's higher salary meant that he and Emily ignored their other interests, feeding their discontent.

Couples who are successful discuss the foundations and the structure of their joint path forward. First, they must come to some agreement on

about the research

I studied **113** dual-career couples. They ranged in age from **26 to 63**, with an even distribution among age groups. The majority of couples—**76**—were in their first significant partnership. Participants in the study came from **32** countries on four continents, and their ethnic and religious backgrounds reflected this diversity. At the time of the study, roughly **35%** resided in North America, **40%** in Europe, and **25%** in the rest of the world. In **68** of the couples at least one partner had children. **Eleven** of the couples identified as gay, and the rest as straight. Just under **60%** of the participants were pursuing careers in the corporate world. The others were spread roughly equally among the professions (such as medicine, law, and academia), entrepreneurship, government, and the nonprofit sector.

I interviewed the members of each couple separately, asking them about the development of their relationships, their career paths, their interactions as a couple, and their family and friend networks.

core aspects of their relationship: their values, boundaries, and fears. (See the sidebar “A Guide to Couple Contracting.”) Negotiating and finding common ground in these areas helps them navigate difficult decisions because they can agree on criteria in advance. Doing this together is important; couples that make this arrangement work, I found, make choices openly and jointly, rather than implicitly and for each other. The ones I studied who had never addressed their core criteria struggled in later transitions, because those criteria never go away.

Next, couples must discuss how to prioritize their careers and divide family commitments. Striving for 50/50 is not always the best option; neither

must one decide to always give the other's career priority.

There are three basic models to consider: (1) In *primary-secondary*, one partner's career takes priority over the other's for the duration of their working lives. The primary person dedicates more time to work and less to the family, and his or her professional commitments (and geographic requirements) usually come before the secondary person's. (2) In *turn taking*, the partners agree to periodically swap the primary and secondary positions. (3) In *double-primary*, they continually juggle two primary careers.

My research shows that couples can feel fulfilled in their careers and relationships whichever model they pursue, as long as it aligns with their values and they openly discuss and explicitly agree on their options. Couples who pursue the third option are often the most successful, although it's arguably the most difficult, precisely because they are forced to address conflicts most frequently.

To work past their deadlock, Emily and Jamal finally discussed what really mattered to them beyond financial success. They identified pursuit of their chosen careers, proximity to nature, and a stable home for Aisha where they could both actively parent her. They admitted their fears of growing apart, and in response agreed to an important restriction: They would live in the same city and would limit work travel to 25% of their time. They agreed to place their geographic boundaries around North America, and Jamal suggested that they both draw circles on a map around the cities where they

felt they could make a home and have two careers. Their conversations and mapping exercise eventually brought them to a resolution—and a new start in Atlanta, where they would pursue a double-primary model. Three years later they are progressing in their careers, happy in their family life, and expecting a second child.

TRANSITION 2

Reinventing Themselves

Psychological theory holds that early in life many people follow career and personal paths that conform to the expectations of their parents, friends, peers, and society, whereas in their middle years many feel a pressing need for *individuation*, or breaking free of those expectations to become authors of their own lives. This tends to happen in people's forties, regardless of their relationship status, and is part of a process colloquially known as the midlife crisis.

We tend to think of a midlife crisis mostly in personal terms (a husband leaves his wife, for example, and buys a sports car), but in dual-career couples, the intense focus on professional success means that the partners' job tracks come under scrutiny as well. This combined personal and professional crisis forms the basis of the second transition. Camille and Pierre, whose story began this article, were in the midst of it.

As each partner wrestles with self-redefinition, the two often bump up against long-settled arrangements they have made and the identities, relationship, and careers they have crafted together. Some of those

arrangements—whose career takes precedence, for example—may need to be reconsidered to allow one partner to quit a job and explore alternatives. It may be painful to question the choices they made together during the previous transition and have since built their lives around. This can be threatening to a relationship; it's not uncommon for one partner to interpret the other's desire to rethink past career choices as an inclination to rethink the relationship as well, or even to potentially end it. Couples who handle this transition well find ways to connect with and support each other through what can feel like a very solitary process.

The second transition often begins—as it did for Camille and Pierre—when one partner reexamines a career or life path. That person must reflect on questions such as: What led me to this impasse? Why did I make the choices I made? Who am I? What do I desire from life? Whom do I want to become? He or she should also take time to explore alternative paths, through networking events, job shadowing, secondments, volunteer work, and so forth. Such individual reflection and exploration can lead couples to the first trap of the second transition:

Mistrust and defensiveness. Living with a partner who is absorbed in exploring new paths can feel threatening. Painful questions surface: Why is my partner not satisfied? Is this a career problem or a relationship problem? Am I to blame? Why does he or she need new people? Am I no longer enough? These doubts can lead to mistrust and defensiveness, which may push the exploring partner to withdraw further



Kurt Afsheen/Getty Images

from the relationship, making the other even more mistrustful and defensive, until eventually the relationship itself becomes an obstacle to individuation, rather than a space for it.

In such a situation, people should first be open about their concerns and let their partners reassure them that the angst is not about them or the relationship. Next, they should adopt what literary critics call *suspension of disbelief*—that is, faith that the things they have doubts about will unfold in interesting ways and are worth paying attention to. This attitude will both enrich their own lives and make their partners' exploration easier.

Finally, they should understand their role as supporters. Psychologists call this role in a relationship the *secure base* and see it as vital to the other partner's growth. Originally identified and described by the psychologist John Bowlby, the secure base allows us to stretch ourselves by stepping outside our comfort zone while someone by our side soothes our anxieties about doing so. Without overly interfering, supporters should encourage their partners' exploration and reflection, even if it means moving away from the comfortable relationship they've already established.

Being a secure base for a partner presents its own trap, however:

Asymmetric support. In some couples one partner consistently supports the other without receiving support in return. That's what happened to Camille and Pierre. Pierre's experience in his former marriage, in which his wife gave up her career for his, made him determined to support Camille,

and he initially stepped up to be a secure base for her. Their lives were so packed, however, that Camille had trouble finding the energy to return the favor. The result was that her exploration and reflection became an impediment to Pierre's, creating a developmental and relationship deadlock. It is important to remember that acting as a secure base does not mean annihilating your own wishes, atoning for past selfishness, or being perfect. You can be a wonderful supporter for your partner while requesting support in return and taking time for yourself. In fact, that will most likely make you a far better (and less resentful) supporter.

In my research I found that couples who make it through their second transition are those in which the partners encourage each other to do this work—even if it means that one of them is exploring and providing support at the same time.

Once the exploring partner has had a chance to determine what he or she wants in a career, a life, or a relationship, the next step is to make it happen—as a couple. Couples need to renegotiate the roles they play in each other's lives. Take Matthew and James, another pair I spoke with, who had risen through the professional ranks in their 18 years together. When Matthew realized that he wanted to get off what he called the success train—on which he felt like a mere passenger—both he and James had to let go of their identity as a power couple and revisit the career-prioritization agreement they had forged during their first transition. Initially Matthew was reluctant to talk to James about his doubts, because he

questioned whether James would still love him if he changed direction. When they started discussing this, however, they realized that their identity as a power couple had trapped them in a dynamic in which both needed to succeed but neither could outshine the other. Acknowledging and renegotiating this unspoken arrangement allowed James to shoot for his first senior executive position and Matthew to transition into the nonprofit sector. The time and care they took to answer their existential questions and renegotiate the roles they played in each other's lives set them up for a renewed period of growth in their careers and in their relationship.

TRANSITION 3

Loss and Opportunity

Attending her mother's funeral was one of the most difficult experiences of Norah's life. It was the culmination of two years of immense change for her and her husband, Jeremy, who were in their late fifties. The change began when their fathers unexpectedly passed away within five weeks of each other, and they became caregivers for Norah's ailing mother just as their children were leaving the nest and their own careers were in flux.

Jeremy is a digital visual artist. His studio's main projects were ending because a big client was moving on. Though he was sad, he had become confident enough to feel excited about whatever might come next. Norah had been working for the same small agricultural machinery business for 26 years; she had once wanted to change careers

a guide to couple contracting

Drawing on my research, I've developed a systematic tool to help dual-career couples who are facing any of the three transitions described in this article. I call it *couple contracting*, because to shape their joint path, partners must address three areas—values, boundaries, and fears—and find common ground in each. Values define the direction of your path, boundaries set its borders, and fears reveal the potential cliffs to avoid on either side. Sharing a clear view in these three domains will make it easier to negotiate and overcome the challenges you encounter together.

First, take some time on your own to write down your thoughts about each of the three areas. Then share your reflections with each other. Listen to and acknowledge each other's responses,

resisting any temptation to diminish or discount your partner's fears. Next, note where you have common ground and where your values and boundaries diverge. No couple has perfect overlap in those two areas, but if they are too divergent, negotiate a middle ground. If, for example, one of you could tolerate living apart for a period but the other could not, you'll need to shape a boundary that works for both of you.



values

When our choices and actions align with our values, we feel content; when they don't, we feel stressed and unhappy. Openly discussing your values will make it easier to make choices that align with them. For example, if

you and your partner know you both greatly value family time, you'll be clear that neither of you should take a job requiring 70-hour workweeks.

Questions to ask each other:

What makes you happy and proud? What gives you satisfaction? What makes for a good life?



boundaries

Setting clear boundaries together allows you to make big decisions more easily. Consider three types of boundaries: place, time, and presence.

Questions to ask each other:

Are there places where you'd love to work and live at some point in your life? Are there places you'd prefer to avoid? Understanding that we

may sometimes have to put in more hours than we'd like, how much work is too much? How would you feel about our taking jobs in different cities and living apart for a period? For how long? How much work travel is too much, and how will we juggle travel between us?



fears

Monitoring each other's fears can help you spot trouble and take preventive action before your relationship enters dangerous territory. Many fears are endemic to relationships and careers: You may worry that your partner's family will encroach on your relationship, that over time the two of you will grow apart, that your partner will have an affair, that you will have to sacrifice your

career for your partner's, or that you may not be able to have children. But sharing these fears allows you to build greater empathy and support. If you know that your partner is worried about the role of your parents in your lives, for example, you are more likely to manage the boundary between them and your partnership sensitively. Likewise, if you are interested in a risky career transition but worried that financial commitments would prevent it, you might agree to cut back on family spending in order to build a buffer.

Questions to ask each other:

What are your concerns for the future? What's your biggest fear about how our relationship and careers interact? What do you dread might happen in our lives?

but felt that she couldn't do so while Jeremy was relying on her for emotional and logistical support. Now she was being asked to take an early retirement deal. She felt thrown on the scrap heap despite her long commitment to the company. No career, no parents, no children to care for—who was she now? She felt disoriented and adrift.

The third transition is typically triggered by shifting roles later in life, which often create a profound sense of loss. Careers plateau or decline; bodies are no longer what they once were; children, if there are any, leave home. Sometimes one partner's career is going strong while the other's begins to ebb. Having raced through decades of career growth and child-rearing, couples wake up with someone who may have changed since the time they fell in love.

They may both feel that way. These changes again raise fundamental questions of identity: Who am I now? Who do I want to be for the rest of my life?

Although loss usually triggers it, the third transition heralds opportunity. Chances for late-in-life reinvention abound, especially in today's world. Life expectancy is rising across the globe, and older couples may have several decades of reasonably good health and freedom from intensive parenting responsibilities. As careers and work become more flexible, especially for those with experience, people can engage in multiple activities more easily than previous generations could—combining advisory or consulting work with board service, for example. Their activities often include giving back to the community, leaving some kind

of legacy, mentoring younger generations, rediscovering passions of their youth, or dedicating themselves more to friendships.

Their task in the third transition is to again reinvent themselves—this time in a way that is both grounded in past accomplishments and optimistic about possibilities for the future. They must mourn the old, welcome the new, figure out how the two fit together, and adjust their life path to support who they want to become.

One thing that struck me when I spoke to couples in their third transition is that it's most powerful when partners reinvent themselves together—not just reflecting jointly, as in the other transitions, but actually taking on a new activity or project side by side. When one is curious about a



Because previous generations retired earlier, didn't live as long, and didn't have access to the gig economy, many couples lack role models for what reinvention can look like.

partner's life and work as well as one's own, an immense capacity for mutual revitalization is unlocked. I met many couples who were charting new paths out of this transition that involved a merging of their work—launching a new business together, for example.

The third transition also has its traps:

Unfinished business. For better or for worse, earlier relational patterns, approaches, decisions, and assumptions will influence how a couple's third transition unfolds. I found that the most common challenge in managing this transition was overcoming regret about perceived failures in the way the partners had "worked" as a couple—how they had prioritized their careers, or how each partner had supported the other's development (or not).

To move through the third transition, couples must acknowledge how they got where they are and commit to playing new roles for each other in the future. For example, Norah and Jeremy had become stuck in a pattern in which Norah was Jeremy's supporter. By recognizing this—and both their roles in cementing it—they were able to become more mutually supportive.

Narrow horizons. By the time a couple reaches the third transition, they will probably have suffered their fair share of disappointments and setbacks. They may be tired from years of taking care of others, or just from staying on the treadmill. As their roles shift and doubts about their identities grow, reinvention may be beyond consideration. In addition, because previous generations retired earlier, didn't live as long, and didn't have access to the gig economy, many couples lack role models for what

reinvention can look like at this stage of life. If they don't deliberately broaden their horizons, they miss opportunities to discover themselves anew.

So couples must explore again. Even more than in the second transition, they need to flirt with multiple possibilities. Like healthy children, who are curious about the world, themselves, and those around them, they can actively seek new experiences and experiment, avoid taking things for granted, and constantly ask "Why?" Most of us suppress our childhood curiosity as life progresses and responsibilities pile up. But it is vital to overcome the fear of leaving behind a cherished self and allow ambitions and priorities to diversify. Exploring at this stage is rejuvenating.

Shifts in people's roles and identities offer a perfect excuse to question their current work, life, and loves. Many people associate exploring with looking for new options, which is surely important. But it's also about questioning assumptions and approaches and asking, "Is this really how things need to be?"

Having rebalanced their support for each other, Norah and Jeremy could open up to new possibilities. Having earned financial security from their previous work, they sought reinvention not only in their careers but also in their wider roles in the world. Encouraging each other, they both transitioned to portfolio working lives. Jeremy became a freelance digital visual artist, took a part-time role teaching young art students at a local college, and dedicated more time to his passion of dinghy sailing. Norah retrained to be a counselor working with distressed families and began

volunteering at a local agricultural museum. With these new opportunities and more time for each other and their friends, they felt newfound satisfaction with their work and with their relationship.

THE CHALLENGES COUPLES face at each transition are different but linked. In their first transition, the partners accommodate to a major life event by negotiating the roles they will play in each other's lives. Over time those roles become constraining and spark the restlessness and questioning that lead to the second transition. To successfully navigate the third transition, couples must address regrets and developmental asymmetries left over from their first two transitions.

No one right path or solution exists for meeting these challenges. Although the 50/50 marriage—in which housework and child care are divided equally between the partners, and their careers are perfectly synched—may seem like a noble ideal, my research suggests that instead of obsessively trying to maintain an even "score," dual-career couples are better off being relentlessly curious, communicative, and proactive in making choices about combining their lives. ☺ **HBR Reprint R1905B**



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Spotlight



One Couple's Perspective

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT dual-career couples tend to focus on challenges and conflicts. But couples who are juggling two ambitious careers and family life also enjoy advantages—ones that go beyond having two incomes. Tamar Dane Dor-Ner and Dan Krockmalnic

illustrate this mix. Dor-Ner has spent 20 years at the consulting firm Bain, where she is a managing partner and the head of its Boston office. Since the two married, in 2009, Krockmalnic, a lawyer, has worked for two large law firms, as an assistant attorney general

for Massachusetts, and, starting in 2017, as general counsel for the *Boston Globe*. The couple—she is 42, he is 39—have two boys, ages eight and six. They spoke with HBR about the professional upsides of being a dual-career couple. Edited excerpts follow.

How do your professional lives help you support each other at home?

TAMAR: We both come at work assuming that we will really enjoy, care about, and bring some measure of ambition to our jobs. That's a shared value—we take it for granted, so it's not a source of tension. If one of us has a bad day at work on Friday and is still preoccupied about it on Saturday, the other one isn't going to be annoyed or surprised. Hopefully we will be compassionate. We try to be present, but we don't get upset if the other one can't turn it off immediately. The only thing worse than having work stress spill into personal time is to go home and be punished for it.

DAN: A corollary is that neither of us is overinvested in the other's career. She has her job, I have my job. We're there for each other to help when needed, but it's not core to my being that I'm the spouse of a Bain partner, nor is it core to her being that she's the spouse of a *Boston Globe* employee. I don't think that would be healthy for us.

How has your dual-career status come into play as Dan has made job changes?

DAN: Tamar's career gives me the freedom to do what I want to do. I can choose [to take a pay cut] to go work for the attorney general's office for



“The stuff we argue about is how much we should try to jam into life, how complicated we should make it.”

two years without our having to worry about paying the mortgage.

TAMAR: I really love my job, and I have for a long time. I’ve wanted that for Dan, and my job has allowed me to encourage him to move to find it. He has that now, and we’re all better for it.

Was balancing two demanding careers a big challenge before you had children?

TAMAR: When we were first married, before we became parents, our professional lives were indistinguishable from when we were single. The changes all came after the kids. I was really lucky in a number of ways: I didn’t leave Bain to go back to business school, as many consultants do, and I became a partner fairly young.

DAN: Let me interrupt to brag about her: She became a partner at 28, and she was the youngest person to become partner that year.

TAMAR: Making partner before I had kids gave me a ton more autonomy, flexibility, and security than I would have had otherwise. Even so, I assumed I’d leave Bain when I had kids. I didn’t think it would be possible to stay. I had been traveling all the time. I carry emotional baggage around parents who travel—my mom died when I was pretty young, my dad traveled a lot, and I didn’t want to do that. I thought I would come back from maternity leave and work for as long as I could before leaving. It was a happy surprise that I was able to navigate it—to find creative ways to not have to travel. I focused on local clients and did a lot with private equity, where much of the work can be done

remotely. My current job running the Boston office is the latest version of that strategy.

How do you decide who’s responsible for housework and child-related demands?

TAMAR: We have to acknowledge that the first thing we do is throw a lot of money at it. We have an amazing au pair who gets the kids ready for school, picks them up, takes them to activities. We have a house manager who does the laundry, shopping, and some of the cooking. Dan and I divide up what’s left. I deal with summer camps. He deals with the boys’ sports. I deal with doctors. He deals with insurance. We’re past the point of thinking it has to be equal or identically sized time commitments. That’s not possible. When new things come up—our eight-year-old needs systematic homework help for the first time—we sort it out.

DAN: It’s all dynamic, but there’s no shortage of talking about it—what’s working and what’s not.

TAMAR: And whenever we talk about juggling responsibilities, we try to remember that we are lucky as hell. We don’t think our choices are at all representative of the choices most people are making. Most couples are both working because they have to—financially, they don’t have a choice. One of our shared concerns is that economic and political trends in this country are actually eliminating choices for families.

What are some other benefits of having a spouse with a big job?

TAMAR: We have almost entirely non-overlapping networks. We know very different kinds of people. My network isn’t built geographically—it’s more by industry. Dan is well connected in Boston, and now that I’m playing a bigger role in our Boston office, that has been useful to me. Also, my new role involves more HR issues than my previous jobs did. I talk to Dan a lot about personnel situations, so I understand the legal perspective. And he’s a very good writer, so I ask him to review things I write.

DAN: Tamar has much more experience and skill than I do in navigating interpersonal relationships. I lean on her for advice in that area quite a bit. At a more basic level, before I began working at the *Globe*, every place I’d worked had been a law firm. (The attorney general’s office is effectively a law firm.) Making the transition to a media company, with P&Ls and budgets, has been a big change for me. Tamar has been, and continues to be, very helpful with that piece of it.

TAMAR: Dan is also a great recruiter for me. When he meets or reconnects with someone he thinks would be a good fit for Bain, he sends that person to me. When I’m recruiting people who have working spouses, and they’re worried about how they will manage the consulting lifestyle, I often have them talk to Dan.

DAN: Those conversations are usually pretty informal ones, and we have them over dinner. Despite Tamar’s having the kind of career she has, we have a very full life together. It’s a way to show people that’s possible, rather than just telling them.

You're managing the balance well right now; what conflicts do you fear in the future?

DAN: What I fear is a shock to the system. That could happen any number of ways—for example, a health issue.

TAMAR: The piece we have the most conflict about is in our social lives. There are moments I feel like we're attempting to do too much socially. The stuff we argue about is how much we should try to jam into life, how complicated we should make it. For example, I'm concerned that as the kids get older, their sports activities are going to take over our weekends. We have different natural equilibria on activities. Dan is restless and wants to do more, and I tend to feel exhausted and want to do less.

Do you worry that your spouse's career might prevent you from taking the next big step in your own?

TAMAR: We both took on bigger jobs in late 2017, and that was an implicit recognition that we had a better handle on things at home and more room to maneuver. The role I'm in now typically lasts six years. At some point, as the kids get older, I'll feel different constraints and liberties, and I'm sure we'll change it up again.

DAN: Because our careers are different, our pictures of the future are too. Tamar's new job is different from her previous one, but she's still a partner at Bain. Whatever happens next, she'll probably be a partner at Bain. I'm less than two years into what I strongly suspect will be the most interesting job I'll ever have, so I'm not putting any thought into next steps now. ©

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The Spouse Factor

A recruiter's view of how couples balance their career ambitions



Jane Stevenson

Global leader, CEO succession, Korn Ferry

PERFORMING WELL AS a high-level recruiter requires understanding what makes your candidates tick—and not just at work. That's especially true if I'm asking them to consider a job that requires relocation. In many cases I already know something about a candidate's family life—including the spouse or partner's professional status, the ages of their kids (if any), and whether they have elderly parents living nearby. In cases where I don't know, I find a way to ask, "Is there anything in your family situation we should be sensitive to?" If there is, it's important to know early on,



“Choosing a spouse may be one of the most important career decisions you’ll ever make. So choose wisely.”

especially if these issues could become “blockers.”

In my 34 years of experience, the most difficult factor to overcome when recruiting a candidate who has to relocate for a new job has been children, especially those in high school or with special needs. (This is often true whether the candidate is married or divorced; moving can be especially hard for someone who shares custody with an ex.) Spouses are the second most frequent reason a candidate will be reluctant to relocate, especially if he or she is part of a couple in which both are pursuing ambitious professional paths.

When I’m trying to recruit one member of a dual-career couple, it’s important to fully understand the other’s career, and also the city to which I hope to relocate them. For so-called trailing spouses, the most challenging careers are physician or lawyer in private practice or owner of a business that isn’t portable. People in these situations have often spent years building a client base and a local reputation, and it’s difficult to reproduce those in a new region. The size of the destination city is also a factor. If the candidate’s partner works in a traditional corporate function, he or she will have an easier time finding a similar (or better) position in a big market like Los Angeles or New York than in a smaller city. If the trailing spouse travels frequently for work, being near a major airport is also vital.

If the candidate’s partner won’t or can’t move, I’ll often ask whether the couple would consider a “commuter marriage.” [See page 58.] Companies

today are increasingly willing to let high-performing leaders commute or work remotely. However, they are much more willing to allow an existing employee to do so, because they know the person’s track record; the risk feels higher with a new employee.

Sometimes we have to think creatively. A few years ago a colleague and I were recruiting a female candidate who was based in Europe for a job in Asia. She had a long-term partner who had a great job and was unwilling to move to Asia. So we looked at the likely career path of the candidate (if she took the new role) and concluded that if she did a great job in Asia, she’d most likely be promoted to a position at headquarters in the United States, where her partner *was* willing to move. So the two commuted for a couple of years, and then the woman I’d recruited did get a top job at headquarters; her partner moved to the United States, bringing them back together.

My work gives me a unique window onto how couples manage these situations, but my views are also informed by a research project I led at Korn Ferry on the careers of female CEOs. We interviewed 57 current or former CEOs about their paths to the corner office, and the most striking takeaway was the importance of strong spousal support for women who aspire to top jobs. When discussing the factors that led to their success, most of the women spontaneously brought up their husbands’ support. About half the CEOs had spouses with substantial careers; managing their dual careers involved complex calendar negotiations, turn taking, weighing of career

decisions, a willingness to relocate, and significant help from housekeepers, nannies, and so forth. About a third had spouses or partners who, by the time the women became CEOs, were assuming primary responsibility for home and children; some were househusbands, and others were retired or worked part-time.

Each of us has only so much energy to utilize, and dealing with a partner who isn’t truly rooting for you professionally saps that energy, limiting your potential. A few of the CEOs we interviewed said they had previously had unsupportive husbands or partners but ultimately went on to connect with more-supportive ones. They speculated that they wouldn’t have attained the top job if they hadn’t received the support they needed. (Most male CEOs I’ve worked with say the same thing.) My children are now 24 and 21, and I tell them very bluntly: Choosing a spouse may be one of the most important career decisions you’ll ever make, because that person will be either a support or a hindrance to your professional ambitions. So choose wisely.

I empathize with couples who struggle with these issues, because I’ve faced them myself. My husband is a pathologist. We’ve been married 37 years. For roughly the first two decades, his career took priority. We moved several times to accommodate his medical school training, residency, fellowships, and stint with the U.S. Air Force. I believe a sturdy flower can bloom anywhere, so I tried to look at those moves as opportunities: When we moved from California to



Philadelphia, my job search led me to executive recruiting. When we moved to Texas, where my then employer had no office, I opened a new one, which was great experience. As my career has evolved, we've made changes. My travel schedule is insane. In 2007, when our children were much younger, my husband left his hospital job and started consulting to have more flexibility and to be more available for the kids. Since then we've considered my career the priority.

Having experienced this push and pull, I recognize that it's typically a phone call from someone like me—followed by a great job offer—that

causes a couple to rethink their coequal arrangement. Very often, the resulting conversation will focus on the upside opportunity. It's natural for partners to compare the potential of their careers and decide to prioritize the one with the higher ROI. In the past that was typically the man's, but today it's frequently the woman's.

At such moments, many dual-career couples will decide that one career has to take a backseat, or that the lesser-earning partner will make a leap of faith and hope that he or she can find (or create) a great job in a new city. When couples face this prospect, I remind them that choosing to

prioritize one partner's career doesn't mean it will be that way forever. Careers are long. The partner who's stepping back right now may be able to step forward in the future. I like to think I have credibility when I make this argument, because I've experienced that shift myself. ©

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Living Apart for Work

When spouses are offered career opportunities in different locations, they may choose to live apart. Some evidence suggests that this is happening more than ever before. HBR executive editor Ania Wieckowski talked with Danielle Lindemann, a sociologist at Lehigh University and the author of *Commuter Spouses* (ILR Press, 2019), to find out how these couples manage. Edited excerpts follow.

HBR: What types of people are most likely to try a commuter marriage?

LINDEMANN: Many of them are highly educated. It's counterintuitive, but when you're in a high-level job, employment possibilities become more limited, because only a few roles will make sense for you. One recent study, for instance, has shown that couples with graduate degrees are more likely to live apart than are couples with just college degrees.

What factors determine whether a couple can make this work?

According to the people I interviewed, the most crucial factor is life stage—especially whether you have kids. People who don't have children at home experience fewer complications. Personality also plays a role: You need a certain self-sufficiency and independence to make this work. Take into account how flexible your job is. If your company allows you to telecommute, or your career has built-in rhythms (such as slower summers in academia), it will be easier to live apart. Consider how far apart you'll be. One couple I studied was living a two-hour drive apart and seeing each other every weekend; they experienced fewer complications than the guy who was in a time zone 12 hours different from the one his wife was in—they had trouble figuring out when to even call each other. Finally, take the temperature of your relationship. If it's new, or if you're struggling a bit, living apart can exacerbate the problems.

Is technology making this easier?

Yes. Many professionals can stay in semiconstant contact with their spouses, texting throughout the day. Frequency of contact is important: One study of workers on oil rigs who were out of touch with their families for days at a time found it was really tough on their relationships. For most couples now, phone and texting are the most important channels of communication—even more than video chat.

Jonathan Kim/Getty Images (left); David Lewis Taylor/Getty Images (right)



“Some couples say that their communication improves when they’re apart because their distance becomes a forcing function.”

Couples who communicate effectively think about which channel to use depending on the kind of information they’re sharing. If they’re making plans and need to get details across, they send an email, but if it’s a more emotional conversation, they’ll get on the phone. Many modern communication tools are what my colleague Raelene Wilding has called *sunny-day technologies*, because they work well when your relationship is going well but can do more harm than good for unsteady relationships.

Should couples go into these arrangements with an endgame?

Most do anticipate living with their spouses again. Some have a specific date in mind, often tied to a career milestone such as the end of a medical residency or retirement. They view having an end goal as a positive thing. Those with a hazier end date tend to experience more anxiety.

What happens when these couples move back in together?

There’s an adjustment period. They’re used to having their own space, and suddenly there are turf wars; they’re used to doing things in a certain way, and suddenly that creates friction. This is similar to what’s been found in research about military spouses coming home from deployments.

Are there any benefits to living apart from your spouse—other than being able to take the job you want?

Yes! Some people find that they’re recharged with the excitement they felt when dating. Others appreciate the absence of all the little tensions



that arise from sharing a space. This is particularly important for women, who cherish their newfound independence—having their own space and their own time. Some couples say that their communication improves when they’re apart because their distance becomes a forcing function. If you have a call scheduled with each other every night at 8:00, you have to talk about your day. Finally, the amount of work they can get done is one of the biggest benefits—they can work evenings when they want to without fear of impinging on family time. This is again particularly pronounced among women,

unless they have children. One woman I interviewed said she didn’t think she would have gotten tenure if she had been living with her husband.

How should employers be thinking about this?

I’d encourage managers with employees in commuter marriages to consider more flexibility for people whose jobs don’t depend on being in the office five days a week. That’s in the employer’s best interest—it may make it less likely that people will look for another job that might allow them to spend more time with a spouse. ☺ **HBR Reprint R1905B**