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by Jennifer Petriglieri

TALENT MANAGEMENT AND THE DUAL-CAREER COUPLE

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**BY JENNIFER
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KOYAK/ISTOCK

IN BRIEF**THE PROBLEM**

High potentials are increasingly committed to their partners' careers as well as their own, but most companies haven't figured out how to accommodate that commitment. They invest heavily in grooming star performers for leadership roles, only to have them resign when confronted with flexibility and mobility challenges. That's wreaking havoc on recruitment and retention.

THE SOURCE

Because "future leaders" are usually expected to advance in a certain way—often through set tours of duty around the globe—it can be difficult for members of dual-career couples to move ahead at work.

THE SOLUTION

Organizations can remove barriers to advancement by allowing people to develop in more-creative ways—through brief "job swaps," for example, or "commuter" roles. But often a culture change is needed. Instead of stigmatizing flexibility, companies must learn to embrace it.

As the head of a large manufacturing plant at a multinational conglomerate, an executive I'll call David had proved himself a competent, trustworthy manager. So when the presidency of one of the company's key businesses unexpectedly became vacant, the CEO sat David down to share the good news that he had been chosen for the role. He had earned it.

Sudden career announcements like this are actually pretty common. Even so, David was caught off guard and didn't know what to say. The head of HR—who was at the meeting—sensed his surprise. Though the offer may have come earlier than expected, she explained, his current boss had been consulted and supported the move. It was a golden opportunity for David, and everyone was rooting for him to succeed. He would have time to make all the necessary arrangements, the CHRO added, and the company would gladly help his family move to the other side of the country, where the business he would run was based. He would start in four weeks.

After asking a few questions and learning about the generous raise that would come with the promotion, David thanked the CEO and the CHRO warmly and promised to discuss the opportunity with his wife that evening. "Of course," they replied, smiling.

They were shocked when David turned down the offer the next day. He was committed to the company and to his career, he said, but he was also committed to his wife's career. She had a challenging final year to complete in her surgery residency program, and a move now would hurt her. David suggested various options—taking on the role at a later date, commuting for a period, or working remotely. The CEO rejected them all. "Leadership is about showing up," he snapped.

A joyful occasion had turned sour in less than 24 hours. The CEO was angry. The company had invested heavily in David. Where was his dedication when it counted, and how could he expect to advance if he was not willing to move for a leadership role? The CHRO was equally confused and upset by David's response. After all, she had introduced work-family policies and generous mobility allowances to support employees like him. David felt cornered. He had been presented with an untimely, rigid option, and now he was being punished for daring to try to negotiate it.

The company soon found another candidate for the job. David continued to perform well in his role, but things had changed. He felt that he was no longer on the top team's talent radar. Nine months later, when his wife, Helen, completed her residency and was again mobile, she and David put out feelers for career opportunities. David was immediately headhunted by a rival company to lead its largest business, in a city where Helen found a position at a prestigious hospital. David's career was back on track, and his wife's was launched. And David's old employer had lost a talented leader—after spotting him, grooming him, and offering him a plum role.

I learned about David from the CHRO, who told me that the company still had not figured out how best to manage the growing number of its employees who want to advance but also care deeply about

their partners' careers. I've seen this again and again in my work over the past several years. Otilia Obodaru, of Rice University, and I have studied more than 100 dual-career couples across generations and organizational settings (interviewing both members of each couple), and I have conducted in-depth interviews with the heads of people strategy at 32 large companies in tech, health care, professional services, and other industries. I also work closely with the heads of talent and learning at companies that send executives to the management program I co-direct at INSEAD. Most talent VPs, I've found, are keenly aware of the rise of dual-career couples. Today, in almost half the two-parent households in the United States (compared with 31% in 1970), both parents work full-time. Still, companies struggle to anticipate and mitigate the effects on their talent pipelines. People in David's predicament resign after their employers have invested in them, and those stories spread like wildfire in organizations, prompting other dual-career high potentials to look for the nearest exit.

The crux of the problem is that companies tend to have fixed paths to leadership roles, with set tours of duty and long-held ideas about what ambition looks like. That creates rigid barriers for employees—and recruitment and retention challenges for their employers, many of whom are failing to consider the whole person when mapping out high potentials' career trajectories. To reap the benefits of their investments in human capital, organizations must adopt new strategies for managing and developing talent. I'll describe them, but first let's take a closer look at why traditional approaches often fail.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE USUAL TALENT STRATEGIES

Although most companies deny having traditional career ladders, executives in midsize and large organizations are widely expected to cycle through a variety of divisions and functions en route to the executive suite. This talent-development model usually involves multiple relocations. It originated in the early 1980s, before technology had opened the door to efficient, productive virtual work. For the most part,

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talent was “unbounded” (my term). That is, spouses didn't have competing careers, so they managed home and family life, freeing up executives to meet their companies' demands.

Times have changed, of course, but most talent management programs are still designed as if every couple had a dedicated homemaker and the internet didn't exist. For executives whose partners have full careers, such programs create two major challenges (and, my research suggests, two top reasons to resign). They are:

The mobility challenge. Members of dual-career couples understand that they'll need to make multiple moves across functions and geographies if they want to ascend to senior roles—and they're not averse to that. But having to drop everything and move at a moment's notice forces them to choose which partner's career will lead and which will follow. These days, fewer couples are willing to make that trade-off.

Take Melissa and Craig, both of whom were managers in their companies' “future leader” programs. They had long harbored dreams of working abroad, but when Craig was offered a “now-or-never golden opportunity” in London, he turned it down. “Melissa

When executives see that people with flexible schedules are still working hard, they adjust their own ways of working—and change the culture.

could probably have found a job in London, but not at the same level and on the same track,” he told me. “Equality is important to us, and we know that senior careers are uncertain. So we want to hedge against risk by balancing our careers. We need to move in a more planned way.”

Eventually, the two did make an international move. First they agreed on a destination—Dubai—and then they launched parallel job searches. Melissa’s interest in moving to the Middle East landed her an internal transfer and a boost in responsibilities. Craig’s company was less keen on a transfer, but he found an exciting new role with a competitor.

Craig’s company lost a talented manager to a rival not because he wasn’t mobile but because it couldn’t match mobility options to his needs. Even if he had accepted the London job, his employer might have paid a price in the long run. Expatriate assignments and geographic relocations are often cut short when an executive’s partner struggles to adapt to a new community, for example, or can’t find a suitable career opportunity. Because Craig secured a good job in Dubai, Melissa’s expat assignment was

more likely than many others to succeed.

The mobility challenge is exacerbated when organizations expect several moves in a short time frame, which is not unusual. At one global chemical company, for example, a new management acceleration program moves people through three functions—and to three locations around the world—within a year and a half. “You move every six months,” the head of talent explained. This rounds out participants’ experience and knowledge in an efficient way. But, she added, “it certainly doesn’t work if you’re in a dual-career couple or for anyone who doesn’t want to drag their family around the world....So it stops a lot of great talent from even applying.”

Even when managers are not enrolled in formal rotation programs, many companies expect their best people to spend no more than three years in any role before moving to a new challenge. Those who don’t progress at that pace will look stagnant and perhaps be shown the door. “I’m dealing with a very talented woman who

is going to lose her job,” the vice president of HR at a global logistics firm lamented. “She’s at the end of a three-year role, and she cannot relocate because of her husband’s career. Rather than being flexible and saying, ‘You can still live in Charlotte and commute to Atlanta three days a week,’ her manager is saying, ‘No, it’s all or nothing. We’ll just have to let her go.’ It’s frustrating. Retaining senior female talent is a key priority for us, but the business is stuck in this rigid way of operating.”

I heard stories like this from about 40% of my research sample. It sounds crazy to set an arbitrary three-year limit on someone who is doing excellent work. But most companies assess executives on potential as well as performance—and people who don’t want to move are dinged on potential, because they’re perceived as lacking ambition. Thwarted advancement is the most likely outcome, particularly for junior and midlevel managers. But at senior levels, where fewer lateral moves are available, there’s a great deal of pressure to “move up or out.”

The flexibility challenge. Every family has tasks that must get done—buying groceries, making meals,

taking the car in for maintenance and repairs, driving children to and from school and activities, and so on. In traditional couples, the noncareer partner assumes the lion's share of these responsibilities. For dual-career couples (even those who can afford to hire help), managing all this on top of work is a constant juggling act. As I studied these couples, it was clear that they do not want to work less, but they do need to work smarter and more flexibly.

Most leadership roles and paths, however, lack flexibility—and people who seek it are penalized. This can lead to what one executive, Emily, called the “Whose job is more important today?” roulette.” She and her partner, Jamal, had a finely tuned system: Emily dropped the kids at school in the morning and worked late in the evening, while Jamal did the opposite. However, when they hit a bump—sick kids, home repairs, elderly parents who needed help—the system broke down and frantic negotiations began. Even when the system worked well, they found themselves being punished. Jamal, a management consultant, described being passed over for a promotion: “I brought more business to my firm than any other senior manager last year, but I left work at 5:30 PM every day. That was noticed. It's not that I wasn't working. I always put in an extra two or three hours after the kids went to bed. But I was told that my lack of presence signaled a lack of commitment to the firm.”

The expectation that rising stars should always be in the office made more sense when most business was local or regional and much of it had to be done in person. But now business is global, runs 24/7, and in many cases must be conducted virtually—and yet physical absence is still stigmatized. The head of learning and development at an engineering firm told me, “We're one of those companies that has had a flexible working policy for a long time, but due to stigma we have not allowed or encouraged people to take full advantage of that, and those who do have been sidelined in their careers.”

The irony is that research has shown the benefits of flexible working—for instance, improvements in efficiency and knowledge sharing. And in my interviews I've found that an organization's commitment to cultivating and valuing flexible work is a key draw for members of dual-career couples. HR teams are well aware of these advantages. That's why they put flexible policies in place.

If companies know what works in theory, why do they keep reverting to their old ways of managing and grooming talent? A big reason is inertia: It's how they've done it for a long time, and they're more likely to make incremental changes than overhauls. There's also a dues-paying element, I've learned. People at the

top tend to think, “Well, if I did it, so should the next generation.” It can be hard for them to identify with dual-career constraints if they came of age in a different time and never faced those constraints themselves. Because the current crop of high potentials aren't willing to sacrifice their partners' needs, a bit of a stalemate results—and mobility and flexibility challenges go largely unaddressed.

The head of learning and development at a large recruitment company put it this way: “Our Millennials are as ambitious and committed to their careers as other generations, but they also hold a place for other people in their lives....This affects how they want to work and progress. If we cannot change to cater to them, we will lose more and more talent.”

That generational shift is the result of changing marriage patterns that have profound implications for organizations. Over the past three decades, *assortative mating*—the tendency of people with similar outlooks and levels of education and ambition to marry each other—has risen by almost 25%. Nowadays, when an organization hires a manager in his or her thirties, that person's partner is also likely to be an ambitious professional with a fast-paced career. Paradoxically, a trend that should expand the talent pool for companies shrinks it instead, because of their outdated ways of developing people.

A NEW TALENT STRATEGY

Designing effective leadership-development paths for members of dual-career couples requires two changes: a revised notion of what is needed to achieve growth and advancement, and a shift in the organizational culture to embrace flexibility in the talent development process.

Recognize that *what* matters more than *where*.

Organizations must stop worrying so much about where aspiring leaders serve their time and instead focus on the skills and networks to be acquired. The talent management director of a global engineering firm described her company's approach like this: “We have a list of experiences that future leaders need to have, but they are location-agnostic. For example, managing a business in crisis or doing a turnaround—sometimes you don't have to move at all to get these experiences.” That's a departure from the days when the company's CEOs believed that one had to work in set locations to move up. Shifting the focus from “where” to “what” opens a range of creative solutions, such as brief job swaps, short-term assignments in various organizations or units (sometimes called secondments), and commuter roles.

Take Indira, an executive at a large pharmaceuticals company who needed to build experience and

knowledge of the Chinese market. To accommodate her dual-career situation, her company facilitated a six-week job swap with a peer in China, followed by a six-month strategic project for the pair to work on. “Because it was a job swap, we felt a mutual responsibility to help each other,” Indira told me. “We acted as each other’s coaches, extensively briefed each other before the swap, spoke almost every day during it, and worked closely together on the subsequent project.” This model of having a peer-coach coupled with a burst of intensive experience acted as a “development accelerator,” she said. “I absorbed so much in that process.”

For instance, Indira was able to quickly build (and then maintain) a strong network in China. Her Chinese peer made great introductions, vouched for her, and asked people to “look after her” on the ground. (She did the same for him in the United States.) Acutely aware that she would be there for only six weeks, she didn’t want to waste a second, so she made an enormous effort, working evenings and weekends. In that time Indira acquired important knowledge of the local market, the cultural aspects of doing business in China, and the variations in company culture between the two countries. And she gained valuable perspective, having never before worked outside the United States. As she put it, she saw that there was “more than one way to skin a cat.” She said she became better at problem solving and dealing with uncertainty.

Indira’s experience is common. Job swaps and shorter-term assignments facilitate rapid development of the networks, skills, and perspective required to progress—which means they can circumvent, or at least minimize, the mobility challenge.

When more time—six months to two years—is needed for development, some companies are experimenting with partially remote leadership roles to accommodate members of dual-career couples. Managers work three or four days a week at the assignment location and the remainder of the week at home. Historically, this sort of arrangement has been stigmatized, as the head of HR at a global mining company explained: “Business leaders believed it signaled a lack of commitment and that people used it to simply work less.” But companies, including his own, are changing their position. “More and more people in the talent pool are asking for it, and we have the technology to make it work, so we’re a lot more open—especially when it’s likely that someone will return to their home location at the end of their assignment.” This view is supported by a growing body of research showing that people who telecommute don’t work less than their colleagues at the office. In fact, they often put in more hours and are more productive in the hours they work.

Though networks, skills, and experiences can be acquired through job swaps, short-term assignments, and remote-leadership arrangements, full-time relocation is sometimes necessary to move one’s career forward. Members of dual-career couples know that, yet they often feel let down by organizations that offer what one executive described as “a wealth of resources but little real support.” She explained that the resources made available to mobile talent are usually tailored to “trailing” homemakers or secondary-career partners, not to full-career partners. They typically include cultural adaptation courses, introductions to homemaker networks, and information about various social activities. When career help is offered, it is geared toward part-time secretarial or teaching posts, for example, or volunteering. Thus, even when resources are abundant, they are often not appropriate for dual-career couples.

Some companies are tackling this shortcoming by using resources such as the International Dual Career Network as two-way headhunters. The mobile employee’s partner can register to receive access to workshops, placement support, and other job seekers’ services. And without paying a headhunter’s fee, the mobile employee’s organization can fill other vacant positions with qualified people in the network, who are quite clear about their location requirements. As one IDCN member told me, “We’ve filled some of our key senior positions through the network. This isn’t a pool of trailing spouses. We’re tapping into a pool of highly skilled people, in some cases more skilled than the talent who is leading the geographic move.”

Remove cultural obstacles to flexibility. Even when companies redesign their talent strategies so that their people can expand networks, skills, and experiences in new ways, those policies often get blocked culturally. That risk is particularly high when leaders from the unbounded generation subscribe to the view that the mobility and flexibility challenges of dual-career couples are, as one executive put it, “personal things that talent should work out for themselves.” For HR’s benefit, such leaders may pay lip service to supporting members of dual-career couples—or they may genuinely believe they’re being supportive—while still, consciously or not, discouraging or punishing the use of flexible work policies.

To give their new talent strategies a fighting chance, companies need to change their culture. First, they must educate senior leaders about contemporary talent and the best ways to attract and nurture it. One organization I spoke with was using reverse mentoring—partnering a senior executive with a talented Millennial—to foster this awareness. “It’s very

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effective,” the head of HR said. “Once leaders understand the challenges, they are much better at accommodating them—and of course those executives who really ‘get it’ are able to hoard the best talent.” The strongest examples I’ve seen set up the reverse mentoring in a bilateral way: The senior executive mentors a Millennial on career and organizational matters, and the Millennial mentors the executive on a range of current issues—sometimes technology and social media, but more often what motivates Millennials and what their lives are like.

That this exposure changes mindsets mirrors a discovery in another area of study: the finding that men whose wives have careers are less likely to discriminate against women at work and more likely to facilitate their career development. The psychological mechanism at play here is personalization. Someone who experiences “the other’s” situation firsthand is much more likely to understand it and respond in a supportive way.

When companies broaden senior leaders’ minds through reverse mentoring and updates on the proven benefits of working flexibly, attitudes about flexible

work quickly shift, and that’s what transforms the culture. Here’s how it happens: When executives see that Millennials (and others) with flexible schedules are still working hard and producing results, they revise their assumptions and begin to adjust their own ways of working. That has ripple effects. Even if the boss makes only small changes, the “signaling” impact is large—it gives others tacit permission to work more flexibly.

One HR professional in a manufacturing company pointed out, “Now we have leaders saying, ‘Hey, listen, I’ve got to take off and run to a ball game,’ or ‘We’re going out for dinner.’ Or whatever it may be. That helps set the tone.” It’s especially powerful when senior men behave this way. That challenges the gender stereotype

and also creates a more desirable place for members of dual-career couples to work. Joshua, a manager in the high-potential program of a global consumer goods company and part of a dual-career couple, explained: “Word gets around the HiPo group which senior managers encourage flexible working, and we compete like crazy to get assignments with them.”

COMPANIES MUST EMBRACE a new model of talent management to attract and retain tomorrow’s leaders. When high potentials see that it’s possible to grow and advance in their organizations without sacrificing their partners’ success, they’ll feel safer opening up about their mobility and flexibility challenges. As a result, their organizations will be able to plan better for the future and make the right kinds of investments in the right people. Everyone will come out ahead. 🔄

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