
Dual-Career Couples: The Juggling Act

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ABSTRACT

For couples with two professional careers, juggling work and home responsibilities has never been easy. However, in today's global economy, where local job opportunities may be harder to find, new challenges are emerging. Is it possible to have a successful career without sacrificing personal satisfaction, life balance, or relationships? A literature review and exploratory conversations with dual-career couples revealed numerous challenges that impact work, home and family, and personal well-being. Success strategies reported by several dual-career couples are presented. Counselling interventions that address role conflict, relationship strengthening, financial concerns, time management, stress management, and work-life balance are recommended.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour les couples dont les membres poursuivent chacun une carrière professionnelle, concilier les responsabilités du travail et du foyer n'a jamais été facile. Cependant, dans l'économie mondiale d'aujourd'hui, où les possibilités d'un emploi local peuvent être plus rares, de nouveaux défis commencent à apparaître. Est-il possible de réussir sa carrière sans sacrifier sa satisfaction personnelle ou ses relations personnelles et de concilier travail et vie personnelle ? Une revue de la littérature et des conversations exploratoires avec des couples poursuivant deux carrières ont révélé de nombreux défis touchant le travail, la vie à la maison, la famille et le bien-être personnel. Des stratégies à succès sont décrites par des couples poursuivant deux carrières. On recommande des interventions de counseling qui visent le conflit entre les rôles, le renforcement des relations personnelles, les problèmes financiers, la gestion du temps, la gestion du stress et conciliation travail-vie personnelle.

Dual-career couples, defined as two people in a committed relationship each with a career, are not a new focus for helping professionals (Hester & Dickerson, 1984; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1969). However, the prevalence of dual-career couples has changed in recent years. In previous generations, women who combined both career and family roles were seen to be "flaunting the socially accepted norms" (Hester & Dickerson, p. 2). Recently, Parker and Arthur (2004) acknowledged that "what was once seen as an exception has now become the rule" (p. 4). They reported statistics indicating that "60% of UK households comprise dual-career couples ... and 40% of all US workers are involved in dual-career partnerships" (p. 1). Other research placed the US number at 60%, identical to the numbers reported within the UK (Catalyst, 1998).

The dual-career couple seems here to stay for the foreseeable future. Many of our clients and colleagues, working as managers and professionals, report that they need to spend more hours at work than they used to. Most are in dual-career relationships and finding it increasingly difficult to balance work, family, and personal time.

Despite the increased prevalence of dual-career couples, however, literature to guide counsellors who work with this population is surprisingly scarce (Haddock, 2002). Research in different countries has revealed similarities among the issues of dual-career couples across cultures (Elloy, 2001). As Canadian career practitioners and counsellor-educators, we were left wondering, "Is it possible to have a successful career in Canada without sacrificing personal satisfaction, life balance, or relationships?"

In preparation for a series of conference presentations about dual-career couples (and the related topic of work-life balance), we reviewed relevant literature and websites, engaged in some informal discussions, and conducted preliminary research with a few dual-career couples in Canada. We were interested in exploring:

1. What challenges are encountered by dual-career couples?
2. What strategies do Canadian dual-career couples use to effectively manage their two careers and find work-life balance?
3. How can we, as counsellors and career management professionals, be more helpful?

We asked these questions of both men and women. However, in keeping with the theme of this special issue of the journal, the primary focus of this article will be on the challenges faced by women within dual-career couples, and the strategies that they use to cope.

Although we recognize that any family with both adults working (just as any single parent juggling the multiple roles of earning a living while raising a family) faces important challenges, our specific focus was on couples where both partners work in professional or managerial positions. We noticed in our conversations with colleagues, and in counselling and coaching our clients, that individuals in professional and managerial careers face unique challenges as they juggle long hours at work, lifelong learning commitments, and responsibilities for home and family.

In this article, we present themes drawn from the relevant literature and provide a Canadian perspective through illustrative examples from our exploratory conversations. Our goal is to stimulate further discussion on this topic, provide some guidance to counsellors working with dual-career couples, and inspire further research about the challenges faced by this growing segment of our population.

DUAL-CAREER CHALLENGES

Although juggling work-life roles has become more of the norm today, many of the challenges reported by dual-career couples are remarkably similar to those reported over 20 years ago—limited opportunities for career advancement, role

conflicts, fatigue, and the fact that women assume more of the responsibilities for household chores than do men (Hester & Dickerson, 1984). Recently, however, the focus has shifted somewhat from the challenges of sharing the household chores to concerns about work-life quality, emphasizing the importance of working on marriages as well as careers (Perrone & Worthington, 2001).

The following section provides a summary of some of the challenges encountered by dual-career couples. We have organized these challenges into three themes—the impact on careers, on home and family, and on personal well-being.

The Impact on Careers

“Three-career families.” Recent research acknowledges the complexity of managing individual careers within the context of committed relationships. Levner (2000), for example, wrote of the “three-career family”—with family life represented as the third career. Ginac (2002), speaking from an organizational perspective, asserted, “As leaders and managers, we need to devise ways to make it possible for two advancing career professionals to thrive at work without sacrificing their personal relationships or their health” (p. 6).

Some of the literature about dual-career couples has examined shifting career priorities, noting that although men want to be more involved in raising children and participating in family life (Perrone & Worthington, 2001), women with children are significantly less likely to be working than either comparable men or women without children (Hardill & Watson, 2004). In the Catalyst (1998) study, almost three-quarters of the women in dual-career marriages reported wanting the option to customize their career paths and pace their advancement.

Whose career comes first? In the Catalyst (1998) study, most dual-career couples saw each career as equal in importance, although where a difference was noted, in heterosexual couples it was generally the man’s career that came first. Lang (2000) reported a similar finding—despite a sense of equality, women were twice as likely as men to limit their work commitments. However, Lang also discovered that, even in cases where one career was identified as primary, that partner indicated making such accommodations as being available for emergency childcare or turning down an opportunity to relocate.

In our conversations, we learned that some dual-career relationships are more complicated than others, particularly when relocation is a job expectation or when working late or on weekends interferes with family responsibilities. In such cases, couples may need to negotiate whose career comes first. Such negotiations may have a significant impact on work as well as family, especially as values conflicts have been identified as contributing to burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). When asked, “Ultimately do you feel one career will have to take priority over the other?” an overwhelming majority of those that we spoke with said, “Yes.”

Travel, “trailing spouses,” and “commuter marriages.” Work-related travel was an issue for several of the couples that we spoke with. In an increasingly global economy, many managers and professionals are expected to travel more often; not surprisingly, this increases the complexity of dual-career relationships.

Life becomes even more challenging when a career move may require leaving the country rather than moving to head office downtown. According to Marx (1999), 75% of international managers are now involved in dual-career relationships. In order to relocate as a family, their partners may become “trailing spouses,” making significant career adjustments to facilitate the move. We know from our experience with immigrants to Canada and clients in global careers that many “trailing spouses” find that their professional skills are not effectively put to use in their new countries. Getting re-established in a professional career may take many years of underemployment and retraining.

Some couples choose to set one career aside temporarily. Often it is the woman’s career that gets sacrificed as she focuses on settling the family into their new home (Judd, 2004). Other couples choose “commuter marriages,” living apart while one of the partners completes an assignment away from home.

The Impact on Home and Family

Role conflicts. Work-life conflict occurs when the demands imposed by our many roles become incompatible with one another; participation in one role is made increasingly difficult by participation in another (Duxbury & Higgins, 2003). Senge (1990) specifically identified the tension within a family when individuals feel pressured to be successful at both work and home.

Children further complicate the lives of dual-career couples as the role of parenting is added to the mix. We have heard, from our clients and our preliminary dual-career research, of professional couples postponing parenting as they build their careers and others limiting the number of children they will have. When children do arrive, many couples choose to have one parent stay home for a while. Unlike previous generations, however, for today’s dual-career couples the decision about which parent will give up a career is not automatic.

Within the Canadian context, as we consulted couples with children, we heard many stories of frustration and disappointment about missing important school and community activities. They acknowledged the challenge of making room in their lives for general child-raising responsibilities (e.g., driving, helping with homework, attending sports and community activities, and staying on top of “kid clutter” around the house). As previously discussed, they found that negotiating whose career was more important could be challenging—especially in terms of who would take time off when a child was sick or who could work late instead of picking the children up from daycare.

An emerging concern for Canadian families is eldercare responsibilities. The Duxbury and Higgins (2003) report highlights an amazing increase in this role for many Canadians within the past few years (up from 8% in 1991 to 60% in 2001). Ten percent of those they surveyed acknowledged that eldercare was causing daily stress or fatigue.

Household responsibilities. Managing household tasks was a challenge identified in the literature previously summarized and also raised by the Canadian dual-career couples with whom we spoke. It seems, from our initial exploration

of the topic, that most women are still carrying the major responsibility for such household activities as shopping, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. Some women in dual-career families face the added complexity of managing household supports such as housekeepers and daycare providers. It seems that even in couples that are financially positioned to pay for the extra help they need, managing a support team adds another role to the many they are already juggling.

Finances. Although dual-career couples typically earn well above average family incomes, many of the individuals who we spoke with reported financial concerns. When asked, “If you could change one thing in your life right now, what would it be?” responses included “Money! We need more of it” and “If I were rich, I’d quit and volunteer.” A common theme was that women, in particular, did not think that they could afford to work less at the present time, nor could they justify the increased expense of home support. Yet they felt cheated about the time that work was taking away from their other priorities.

A recently released analysis of the impact of federal budgets on Canadian women raises even greater concerns (Yalnizyan, 2005). The analysis revealed that deficit-driven spending cuts impacted affordable housing, childcare, and Employment Insurance programs, all of which may have a significant impact on the financial situation of Canadian dual-career couples.

Time. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, the primary challenge identified by the individuals we spoke with was “time”—time to spend with their spouse, children, parents, or friends; time alone for important activities such as exercise and personal or professional development; and time to do the necessary things around the house such as cooking and cleaning. Coordinating busy schedules was another challenge reported by several of the dual-career couples with whom we spoke. When we asked women what advice they would give to other women in dual-career relationships, “time” surfaced as the major theme. “Take time for yourself,” was one woman’s advice. “If you don’t put yourself first, everything else will fall apart.” Another said, “Take time to pay attention—things go so fast.”

The Impact on Personal Well-being

The stress of constant change. In our conversations with Canadian dual-career couples, we saw a pattern of lives filled with constant change. Changes, as we know, are stressful (Hobson et al., 1998). The couples that we spoke with reported changes within the last year that included starting a new job, increased responsibilities at work, increased work-related travel, buying a townhouse, moving in with a new partner, starting a business together (on top of two full-time jobs), aging parents, and children that were growing and demanding more time. One woman reported significant changes within her industry (health care) that had motivated her to seriously consider a career change.

Exhaustion. Many of the women that we spoke to reported being exhausted. Several said that they felt constantly stressed and had difficulty finding any sort of balance in their lives, reporting little energy for weekend activities after working long hours during the week. Each woman we spoke with reported getting insuffi-

cient sleep; interestingly, the number of hours of sleep seemed to be directly correlated (in a negative direction) with the number of children in the family.

Sleep deprivation is a serious concern. A National Sleep Foundation (2000) poll identified that at least two-thirds of adults report that sleepiness impairs their concentration and makes handling stress more difficult. Research consistently links sleep deprivation with increased accidents, difficulties concentrating, poor work performance, and, in some cases, with increased sickness and weight gain (Hill, 2004; National Sleep Foundation, 2000). Another study linked depression, diabetes, and heart disease to sleep deprivation (Hassen, 2004). Perhaps even more frightening for exhausted women, study after study reports that drowsy drivers are about as impaired as those that are legally drunk (Hassen).

Literature on sleep deprivation consistently recommends at least eight hours of sleep per night (National Sleep Foundation, 2004). Yet the working mothers that we spoke with were getting nowhere near that amount of sleep. Some of our clients and colleagues have acknowledged that even eight hours of sleep per night is not enough to feel rested.

DUAL-CAREER SUCCESS STRATEGIES

There have been empirical studies on dual-career couples in Australia, Europe, and North America (Elloy, 2001; Haddock, 2002); other researchers have taken a qualitative approach to reporting the life-work experiences of dual-career couples (Ginac, 2002; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Parker & Arthur, 2004). Such studies highlight success stories as well as challenges. Haddock challenged the negative stereotypes of dual-career couples as portrayed in the literature and popular media. Ginac reported that most of the couples in her study were very positive and that “the most amazing take-away . . . was that every woman was strong, independent and in control of her destiny” (p. 7). Through her research, however, Ginac discovered that there was no single success formula for living the dual-career lifestyle—each couple seemed to have developed a unique solution to juggling their multiple roles.

The common thread in Ginac’s (2002) research seemed to be an attitude of mutual encouragement and support. Many of the happiest and most fulfilled couples, both professionally and personally, seemed to live by the adage “family first.” In another report, counsellor Beverly Baskin concluded that “the hallmarks of a successful dual-career marriage appear to be flexibility and a mix of independence and interdependence” (2004). Parker and Arthur’s (2004) study produced similar results. They concluded,

perhaps a more dynamic image is that of a perpetual dance, where each partner takes separate steps while staying connected and responsive to the other. If so, it is a dance where both partners will need to hear and respond to new musical variations. (p. 21)

The couples we spoke with had very different ideas about “balance” and had developed a wide range of helpful (and sometimes not so helpful) coping strategies. To address the challenge of trying to spend time with each other, many

couples tried to have dinner together as often as possible. Many couples chose to reduce travel. Most found that scheduling personal as well as work activities was essential. In some cases this involved limiting overtime, not working on weekends, working flexible hours, and taking long vacations. Others scheduled longer periods of time to be devoted to their spouse or family—vacation times and weekends away were considered important by many. A few cautioned against over-scheduling, especially on weekends.

Some couples, separated by distance or long work hours, connected by phone each day. One of our colleagues, a woman with young children, mentioned the importance of maintaining bedtime routines. Exercise was recognized as an important contributor to balance, yet many women acknowledged that they had given up on finding time to exercise or cook meals at home. Those with children noted how important it was to have good supports in place such as domestic help or a daycare close to work.

To create some semblance of balance in dual-career families, the most common coping strategy that we heard about was to put one career first. One woman told us, “There’s no way we can both go ‘full tilt’ and not impact our children.” This recognition is emerging world-wide as demonstrated by a Malaysian e-zine recently introducing the now-familiar North American concept of “stay-at-home dads” or “the brave househusband” (Ching, 2005).

One corporate manager, from a dual-career family with no children, reported that she and her spouse had achieved balance by putting work first and doing nothing else. Another couple had chosen to take no vacations. Still another couple acknowledged that fast food had become the meal of choice in their family. Clearly, then, “balance” has very individual interpretations. One wonders if some of the lifestyle choices will be sustainable, or even desirable, over the long term.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING DUAL-CAREER COUPLES

It appears that dual-career couples are facing unprecedented challenges as they juggle increasingly complex careers in times of transformational change within most industries in Canada. Women seem to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of stress from role overload. In most cases, they retain primary responsibility for housework, child-rearing, and eldercare. Many of the women that we spoke with were sacrificing sleep and risking their personal well-being as they tried “to do it all.”

Counsellors and other helping professionals are well positioned to support dual-career couples. Due to the professional or managerial positions they hold, many dual-career couples have access to counselling services through their extended benefit plans or employee assistance programs at work. Finding time for counselling, however, might be more of a challenge. Some of the newer uses of technology (e.g., cybercounselling, tele-counselling, facilitated online discussion forums, or e-coaching) might make counselling more accessible for professionals with busy lives.

Counsellors working with dual-career couples might begin by exploring some of the issues that have surfaced here: the implications of dual careers on work, home, and families, and personal well-being. In the following section, keeping with the theme of this special issue of the journal, the emphasis will be on interventions for women. However, it is important to ensure that the focus on helping women is not misinterpreted to suggest they are somehow more responsible for the challenges faced within dual-career couples. In our preliminary exploration of this topic, it was clear that both members of the couples were typically feeling stretched and the best solution to the challenges faced by dual-career couples would involve a commitment to change by both partners.

Home and Family Interventions

Relationship building. In a study by Haddock and colleagues (2001, as cited in Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003), “virtually all of the couples indicated that marital equality or partnership was one of the strategies they believed was central to their successful balance of family and work” (p. 341). Counsellors could be helpful in assisting couples to negotiate an equitable division of labour (Haddock, 2002) and to address the challenges of juggling multiple roles. We have developed a weekly life role prioritizing exercise, for example, that provides dual-career couples with a practical tool for anticipating and accommodating the demands of multiple life roles. Counsellors can also help couples and families to communicate more effectively, acknowledge negative feelings, and recognize that spending time together is an important success strategy (Haddock).

Financial management. Some women in dual-career families acknowledged that they would prefer to work less but need the money that work brings in. These women and their partners might benefit from financial counselling to help them gain better control of their spending or re-examine financial commitments that they have made. This is not meant to imply that women or men should be expected to give up professional careers to take care of homes or families. However, in some cases, dual-career couples are earning a great deal of money but sacrificing relationships, health, and work-life balance as they do it. Counsellors who do not feel equipped to address financial issues might prefer to refer clients to specialists within the community.

Personal Well-being Interventions

Work-life balance. Counsellors can help dual-career couples to identify a preferred mix of life-work roles and set goals to achieve and maintain a lifestyle that is personally satisfying. Counsellors can also help couples re-examine the myths that may be guiding their choices. Both women and men may have been told that it is unwise to take a step back in their careers. Women, in particular, may have “supermom” images that are unrealistic and impossible to live up to. They may be caught between expectations of housekeeping that were set by “stay-at-home” mothers and expectations of career performance that were set by professionals without family or home responsibilities. Sometimes examining beliefs and attitudes can

go a long way toward normalizing the feelings that dual-career couples are experiencing, helping them to set more achievable and satisfying goals.

Stress. Significant changes, whether happy or sad, are stressful (Hobson et al., 1998). Most dual-career couples experience multiple changes both at work and at home. The cumulative effect of these changes can create stress that is debilitating. Counsellors can help individuals examine the changes they are experiencing and recognize the potential cost, both personally and professionally. Counsellors can also help couples by normalizing their stress and work-life conflicts (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003) and working with them to develop coping strategies and healthy lifestyle habits that will contribute to their resiliency.

Time management. Although some busy dual-career families might benefit from time management tips and strategies, it is important to acknowledge that these individuals are, in most cases, already doing a lot in a limited amount of time. However, recent studies suggest that multitasking may reduce productivity rather than enhance it (Rubinstein, Meyer, & Evans, 2001). Counsellors might help dual-career couples to re-evaluate priorities and allocate their time accordingly, access external supports (e.g., housekeepers or childcare), or choose to invest in time-saving equipment (Haddock, 2002). They might also focus on helping individuals to avoid multitasking, cluster similar activities together (e.g., complete shopping, errands, and appointments on the same day), and build in sufficient time for self-care and personal/professional development.

Sleep. Many women, in particular, in dual-career families are finding time for the increasing demands of their complex lives by sleeping less. This is not a good long-term solution. In a 1998 survey on women and sleep, the US National Sleep Foundation found that most women were getting less than six and three-quarter hours of sleep, not the recommended eight (National Sleep Foundation, 2004). In our exploratory conversations, some women reported getting only five to six hours of sleep most nights. Counsellors can help sleep-deprived women re-examine the choices that they are making and strategize to build sufficient sleep back into their schedules.

Wellness. Besides sacrificing sleep, many dual-career couples are making other unhealthy choices to try to cope with their busy schedules. Counsellors can help individuals set goals for healthier living, such as increasing exercise and eating nutritious food.

Career Interventions

After carefully examining their personal well-being and re-evaluating their financial requirements, some dual-career couples might benefit from career counselling to help them find more suitable and sustainable careers. For some, an environment that is a slightly better “fit” might reduce the extra time and mental energy devoted to work and contribute to a more balanced life. For others, a more significant career change might be required. “The practice of consciously scaling back as a strategy to cope with family and work responsibilities is pervasive,” according to Cornell sociologists Becker and Moen, as cited in Lang (2000).

“Scaling back” could involve work that is less demanding, pays more money for less hours (e.g., consulting), or offers greater flexibility in terms of scheduling and location (e.g., telecommuting or starting a home-based business). Career counsellors might also offer programs and services similar to those at Indiana University (2004) to address the specific challenges faced by “trailing spouses,” both before they relocate (e.g., to negotiate transfers or temporary leaves) and after they arrive in their new communities (e.g., to facilitate work search). None of these are “one size fits all” solutions. An important role for career counsellors would be to help dual-career couples carefully examine their options and initiate plans for change.

Perhaps the counselling profession could also play an advocacy role for change. In one American study, nearly 40% of employees stated that their careers would be negatively impacted if they took advantage of flexible schedules or took time off for family reasons (Galinsky, Bond, & Swanberg, 1998). Recently, a client in a middle-management position within a large Canadian organization told us a very similar story (i.e., in her department, far fewer job-sharing opportunities exist now than were available a few years ago). Until employers offer more scheduling flexibility and family-friendly policies, juggling work with other life responsibilities will continue to be a problem for dual-career couples. Counsellors could also advocate with government funders and policy-makers for important community-based supports such as affordable housing, accessible daycare, improved health services, enhanced parental leave, and broader access to counselling and career services across the lifespan, regardless of employment status.

SUMMARY

Dual-career couples are on the increase in Canada, and they face many challenges that counsellors are equipped to help with. Although the counselling and business literature has long addressed concerns about work-life balance, many women, in particular, are still striving to “do it all.” Career counsellors might focus on assisting individuals to re-evaluate career choices, negotiate changes at work, make effective career decisions, and enhance their work-life balance. Personal and family counsellors might focus on strengthening relationships, addressing role conflicts, enhancing life skills, and helping to foster wellness and resiliency to cope with stress, fatigue, and role overload. Counsellors are also well positioned to play an important advocacy role for dual-career couples and their families. Perhaps counsellors can also play a role in helping dual-career couples to rethink their life choices and priorities and work together to achieve the elusive work-life balance that so many seem to be seeking.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As we engaged in exploratory discussions with dual-career couples in Canada, several themes emerged that could be worth exploring in future research. Our

preliminary observations, clearly limited in scope, highlight some of the challenges faced by dual-career couples as they juggle the demands of work, family, and home. While most of the couples we spoke with reported career success, several of the coping strategies they relied on (e.g., foregoing sleep, exercise, healthy meals, and personal and couple time) have the potential for long-term negative consequences to their health and personal well-being, as well as their satisfaction with work and home.

A comprehensive survey of dual-career couples, with questions that address the challenges identified in the existing literature and in some of the illustrative examples presented here, could reveal the extent and magnitude of the problem within Canada and globally. In-depth qualitative research, perhaps using an appreciative inquiry approach (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), could also contribute to our understanding of challenges encountered by dual-career couples and how they are successfully managing their complex lives.

Acknowledgements

A preliminary draft of this article was presented at NATCON 2004 in Ottawa, Canada. The authors would like to thank reviewers of the earlier draft for their guidance in reshaping this article.

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