One of the growing issues facing companies is managing employees who are part of a dual career couple. Traditionally, corporate policies were based on the assumption that even if one spouse worked, that person’s income would make up a relatively small fraction of the total household income. The spouse was assumed to be available to handle numerous household responsibilities so the employee could focus on work. Much of the workforce is now juggling more complex personal logistics because both spouses are employed outside the home.

One of the objectives of the SPE Talent Council is conducting surveys and statistical analysis to highlight potential capability/expertise gaps and to identify possible solutions. To obtain information on the prevalence of dual career couples and the challenges facing them, SPE emailed a survey in May to 46,777 professional members, of which 5,570 responded. The results showed that dual career couples make up about half the workforce. Dual career couples will probably form a larger proportion in the near future, because those in such relationships are younger than those who are not. This article is a summary of the survey results, which are available in SPE-151971-MS at www.onepetro.org.

The largest number of survey responses, with similar percentages, came from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, where SPE has the largest number of members. Members in 93 countries responded. Of the total number of responses, 47% reported they were part of a dual career couple, 11% said they were previously part of a dual career couple, and 42% considered themselves to be single career. We also examined the results for two other groups. The first group was those in which the respondent said he or she is contributing between 33% and 67% of the household income, so that each partner is contributing at least a third. The second group was made up of those who reported contributing between 40% and 60% of household income. Of those who identified themselves as “dual career,” 47% said the lower-paid partner provides at least a third of the household income and 37% said that each partner provides nearly equal portions of the household income. Of all the survey responses, 22% came from couples where the minimum income contribution is a third and 17% came from those where the contribution is nearly equal. The days when the spouse’s salary could be viewed as providing an insignificant fraction of the household income that could easily be covered by a relocation bonus are gone.

The demographics of those in couples where the partners are providing at least 40% of the household income are distinctly different from other groups. The curve has a sharp peak for those 30 to 34 years old (Fig. 1). The curve for those not in a dual career couple relationship also has a strong peak for those age 50 to 54 and then declines rapidly with increasing age. The percentage of dual career couples for each age range who contribute nearly equally does not peak until age 30 to 34 and then decreases.

The demographics for women are different than for men. The age distribution for men peaks at age 50 to 54, while the age distribution for women peaks at 30 to 34 with a smaller peak at age 50 to 54. Women are more likely
to be part of a dual career couple and are more likely to be in a relationship in which both partners are nearly equal contributors to the family income. Also, in contrast with the pattern for men, the number of single women drops with age and does not have a secondary peak at age 50 to 54.

The increasing presence of women in the workforce is shown more clearly when the percentage of women in each age bracket is plotted (Fig. 2). The entry of women into the workforce has increased from a few percent for those 60 and older to about 32% for those between 20 and 24 years of age.

There are significant differences in choice of employer for men and women. International oil companies (IOCs) are the top employer for all categories, but a higher percentage of women choose to work for IOCs and national oil companies (NOCs) than men. Women are less likely to work for service companies or to be self-employed. Single career women are more likely to work for NOCs and universities than women in a dual career couple, but the number of female academicians responding to the survey is small. That so many people work for IOCs plays a role in some of the other observations.

Women are almost twice as likely to have their partner working in the petroleum industry, with 65% of their partners in the industry compared with 34% of men’s partners in the industry. Women also are more likely to have their partner working for the same company as their partner working for the same company with 36% of the dual career women working for the company where their partner works, while only 20% of the dual career men work for the same company. This indicates that for women who wish to be geographically mobile, there are major advantages to working for the same company as their partner. In contrast, the same employer effect is not as pronounced for men, but is strongest for those at universities and NOCs.

Looking at the number rather than the percentage of people in a category can be misleading, because of the greater numbers of people working for certain types of employers. Many more women work for IOCs than other types of employers. They constitute the largest number of women who...

**Fig. 1—Nearly equally earning dual career couples.**

**Fig. 2—Female percentage of workforce.**

**Fig. 3—Workers who can easily relocate.**
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said that they can easily relocate, yet a lower percentage of women working for IOCs reported that it is easy for them to relocate. This is an example of how the same study could be used to make very different points. To avoid misinterpretation of the driving factors, the survey results were analyzed from multiple perspectives.

Working for the Same Employer
Companies can more easily manage dual career couples if both partners work for them. While some people see working for the same company as an advantage, others strongly disagree. Comments from survey respondents in favor of both working for the same company include:

- “We are more impressed by companies that make the effort to employ both of us (of different nationalities)—they recognize the value of dual career couples. In our last two moves (country and company), we joined the same company and were pleased with how they treated us as a couple. Now that we have children, we also need the companies to be aware that one of us will need to delay commencement of work until we can find suitable childcare.”

- “We are fortunate in that we work for the same Scandinavian origin company. There is a cultural acceptance that family life is important, to the extent that if pushed it overrules working life.”

- “I believe there are more upsides than downsides to being a dual career couple, especially when working for the same company. As an expat, it is quite handy being dual career; means we can both work while living overseas.

Many more comments were opposed to both working for the same company. Some examples are:

- “Career planning within one company is difficult since the influence on each other is very high. It is much easier if the company doesn’t know that you are a couple.”

- “Companies unfortunately often still force couples to choose a leading and a following career instead of accepting equal career partners.”

- “I have been told I could not be promoted because my husband would not transfer, even though a transfer was never offered. I left the company and we transferred.”

- “My husband and I work for the same IOC. Despite joining the company independently and working in positions that are compatible with working in the same locations, we have been repeatedly informed by various managers and human resources representatives that ‘dual career couples are very difficult.’ Dual career status is definitely something that is generally viewed as being detrimental to our respective promotion prospects. The company has an official policy not to duplicate certain salary benefits for dual career couples, so in many cases, one partner is financially penalized.”

Of those couples who were previously part of a dual career situation, 18% said that the stress of being part of a dual career couple was a factor in ending the relationship and about half of them had lived apart. Of those who lived apart, 42% worked for IOCs, 23% for independent oil companies, 14% for consulting companies, and 8% for service companies. The tensions caused by living apart are a serious issue. Current dual career couples reported that 23% of them have lived or live apart so that they both can work. The problems resulting from family separations can affect job performance.

Taking Care of Children
To look at those who are most stressed by juggling work and home responsibilities, respondents who described themselves as dual career were further screened to a group in which each spouse was contributing at least a third of the household income and have dependent children living with them. Overall, 64% of all of those who identified themselves as part of a dual career couple have dependent children living with them.

Consistent with the trend for women to delay child bearing into their mid-30s, the median age of women with dependent children and who contribute more than 33% of the household income is 40. In contrast, the median age of women without children is 31. Many women work for a decade or longer before they have children.

Without a stay-at-home spouse, dual career couples with children are masters of complex coordination, contingency planning, and improvisation. Of the female respondents, 63% said that they have to coordinate frequently to accommodate family obligations, short-notice work schedules, and travel, while 51% of the men said that they do. Just under half of the women and 50% of the men reported that they are successful in accommodating work schedule changes, meetings, travel, and other non-routine work events; 50% of the men and 52% of the women said they are sometimes successful. In general, their employers are flexible with only 4% of the men and 3% of the women saying they have no flexibility and 32% of the men and 34% of the women saying that they have a lot of flexibility to accommodate personal matters such as family illness and emergency home repairs.

A significant fraction of these households depend on family for household assistance. The cost of household assistance is highly variable, but people in more than 60 countries said they had access to relatively inexpensive household help.

Conclusion
This survey indicated that dual career couples make up about half of the workforce and that the percentage may increase. Relocations that prevent one of the partners from working impose significant financial and emotional strains on dual career couples. Employers that link advancement to relocation will be at a disadvantage in attracting and retaining talent in a competitive market.

By the time professional women become mothers, they may have spent a decade or longer in the workforce, and their employers will have a considerable investment in their development. Policies and programs that provide flexibility and support to dual career parents may be an excellent strategy for attracting and retaining talent and in creating a loyal workforce.

Companies need to develop better procedures for managing the careers of couples when both work for the same company. Couples should not be put in the position of competing with each other for whose career takes the lead. The workforce is changing. New and more flexible ways of working will not only attract and retain dual career couples and working parents, but also people who are approaching retirement.
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