



THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

# MAKING THE WORKPLACE WORK FOR DUAL-CAREER COUPLES

By Brooke Allocco, Deborah Lovich, Michelle Stohlmeyer Russell, and Frances Brooks Taplett

**I**T'S ONE OF THOSE weeks when both you and your spouse have to travel for work. You try to avoid being gone at the same time, but sometimes it just happens and now you're e-paying your nanny overtime to cover. On your way to Paris on Monday, your train has a maintenance issue, which means you're stuck in London, calling in to a meeting you're supposed to attend in person. Your nanny phones to say your three-year-old is vomiting. There's nothing you can do—you can't get home before Friday. This is the kind of situation dual-career couples face often.

White-collar employees are more likely than ever to be part of a household where both partners work full-time. Today, about 60% of all US households have two working parents, according to the Pew Research Center. (The number is similar in Japan, while in Canada and Australia, it is closer to 70%.) These employees face a constant struggle to balance work and domestic responsibilities, particularly when young children are in the mix but also when elderly parents or other family members

require care. Companies may think this is not their concern—after all, it affects employees' lives at home, not at work—but it exacts a significant toll on engagement and productivity. As with any situation that spills over from one's personal life into the work day, employees who have family responsibilities can struggle to be fully present at work. Worse, at many organizations, employees have few—if any—role models who understand the challenges and have found ways to make everything work.

Some people consider this to be a women's issue, but it's a workforce issue. Given that companies are increasingly considering gender diversity, particularly at senior leadership levels, the discussion should shift from "women in the C-suite" to "leaders in the C-suite—both women and men—from dual-career households." Companies that get this right will boost engagement and productivity throughout the workforce. They will help employees be their best at home so that they can also be their best at work. In the longer term, these companies will become more attractive to both current and

prospective employees, improving recruiting and retention, and helping to win the war for talent.

## Societal Shifts Can Drain Your Talent Pool

There are a host of reasons why dual-career households have become the norm. Women's participation in the workforce continues to increase as more career paths open up to women, and economic realities often require two incomes to get by. When both of those incomes are provided by jobs that involve significant responsibility, travel, and time, both partners need to juggle the inevitable crises—large and small—that come with providing care for family members. The sick kid, the snow day, the elderly parent who needs a ride to the doctor, the spouse dealing with a long-term illness and recovery. Moreover, millennial men are more likely than men of previous generations to want to be involved at home and take on some of the domestic responsibilities so that women can work. (See “How Millennial Men Can Help Break the Glass Ceiling,” BCG article, November 2017).

In some organizations, C-suite leaders may not have any direct experience with such issues. Generally, these are senior executives with stay-at-home spouses who handle family and other household responsibilities. These corporate leaders have come through the ranks in a traditional culture that compartmentalizes work life from personal life and they might assume that someone else is around to handle the latter. Such support can provide these executives the flexibility to do whatever's necessary to meet the demands of the job. And because of this experience, they often establish cultures and HR agendas at their companies—perhaps unintentionally—in which that is the only possible path to the top.

Yet even companies that say they support employees in dual-career households are often not set up that way. This carries real costs, in that it often prevents large swaths of the workforce from reaching their full potential, at a time when talent is so critical. Women (and increasingly men) may scale

back their ambitions and be less willing to volunteer for a high-profile project or an overseas assignment under the assumption that they could not fit those new responsibilities into their lives—on top of everything else. Some opt out of the workforce entirely—at least for some portion of time. According to BCG research of one market, 60% of all nonworking parents cite childcare as one of the top reasons they do not work. As a result, organizations may not have the best talent moving through the pipeline. In short, these companies may be missing opportunities to help people in dual-career households reach their potential—both at home and at work.

## Four Priorities for Change

Organizations can help retain their talent by adapting to the needs of dual-career households in four ways: change how people work, change the culture, change what a successful career path looks like, and change the support that employees receive. (See the exhibit.)

**Change how people work.** Genuine flexibility is critical. Allowing employees to work under flexible terms—as long as they get their work done—is a huge opportunity. This includes formal programs such as remote work or adjusted hours, as well as informal situations such as leaving early for a child's concert. In a team environment, leaders can establish working norms that balance individual and business needs. (See the sidebar “Changing How People Work at Boston Scientific.”) For example, at the beginning of every BCG project, the team leader establishes explicit standards for each member through a program called PTO—predictability, teaming, and open communication. The standards set the terms for aspects such as working remotely, meeting etiquette (for example, no meetings before 8:00 a.m.), expectations for being accessible online, time off, and personal goals (such as fitting in three gym workouts per week). Since the PTO program launched, BCG has seen notable improvements in both personal satisfaction and project performance, including a 35% boost in perceived teamwork and collaboration, a 35% increase in the

## Four Priorities to Support Employees in Dual-Career Households



Source: BCG.

value delivered to clients, and a 100% increase in team effectiveness.

In another example, Bank Muscat, a leading financial-services firm in Oman, has a creative approach to creating genuine flexibility for both men and women. A portion of each workday, from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., is fixed, but the remaining hours are flexible and set at the employee's discretion. Maintaining a significant period of overlap, when the entire staff is working, helps the program succeed.

**Change the culture.** Having flexible work programs and policies is not enough—senior leaders need to ensure these initiatives work as advertised. For example, leaders need to reward results (not just face time) and set realistic email response times. They also need to avoid inadvertently creating—or rewarding—a culture that is inhospitable to dual-career colleagues. For example, an impromptu team dinner may seem like a good way to build morale, but for working parents, it would require a frantic search for a last-minute babysitter and missed time with children.

Just as importantly, leaders need to serve as role models by actively taking advantage of these programs—working at different times or locations, and engaging in family and personal activities. Paternity leave is a good example. Many companies have a

policy in place, but new fathers who take paternity leave are often stigmatized. Corporate cultures regarding flexible work won't change unless men and people at the top are seen using these programs—and actively encouraging others to do so.

For example, Mike Johnson, a group marketing manager at the Rhythm Management business unit of Boston Scientific, juggles four young children with his wife, a managing director at a global accounting firm. The pair share childcare responsibilities and actively coordinate their schedules and travel responsibilities so that at least one of them can be home with their children. He has taken advantage of Boston Scientific programs such as paternity leave and onsite childcare.

Also, he actively creates a supportive culture for the employees from dual-career families on his team, in which people can openly discuss non-work commitments. All members of the team—including Mike and his boss—support each other when someone needs to miss work for the occasional personal commitment, and people have the opportunity to take on more responsibility when they want it. “The culture in our team is about respecting the division between work and life,” he says. “One of the biggest challenges is that work too easily seeps into our personal lives.

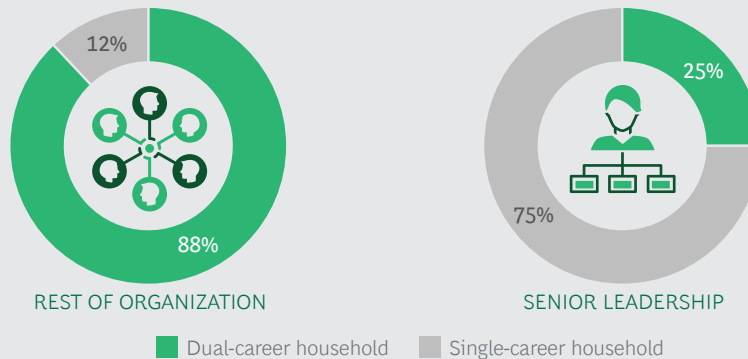
## CHANGING HOW PEOPLE WORK AT BOSTON SCIENTIFIC

The Rhythm Management business unit of Boston Scientific—which develops technologies to treat heart conditions—launched a project to understand the needs of the unit’s employees in dual-career households better. The project started with a comprehensive survey, which found that about 80% of respondents were in a dual-career or single-parent household. (See the exhibit below.) But the picture looked very different for the group’s senior leaders. Specifically, these senior leaders were twice as likely as directors—and seven times as likely as individual managers and employees—to have a stay-at-home spouse. The survey results helped the business unit’s executive leadership team understand the changing demographics of its workforce and the needs and challenges of employees whose households looked very different from those of senior executives.

As a result, the business unit took specific steps to change how people work. It no longer holds routine meetings before 9:00 a.m. or after 4:00 p.m. All team leaders undergo training on how to create more flexible work conditions for employees. And the unit reset expectations regarding career paths, clarifying that goals can change and career ambitions can ebb and flow over time.

Brooke Allocco, the vice president of clinical communications and education for the Rhythm Management unit of Boston Scientific and a coauthor of this article, said of the effort, “We reset our working norms and created more flexibility for all employees, regardless of their seniority level or demographic segments, so that they could feel successful both at work and at home.”

### In Boston Scientific’s Rhythm Management Division, Most Employees Are in Dual-Career Households



Source: Boston Scientific.

Note: Dual-career households include single-parent households.

We need to ask ourselves, ‘Are there times when life can seep into work?’”

**Change what a successful career path looks like.** Unlike in the past, there are many successful career paths today. Some employees may fast-track to the top in a straight line, while others may take a longer, less direct approach. Far from being

a problem, a diversity of roles and experiences can round out skill sets and equip individuals to become better leaders. Companies need to create environments in which employees can work part-time, stop working for a stint, change roles and specialties, or adopt a different working model, all while still preserving their future options at the organization.

In addition, organizations need to have ongoing dialogue about what is right for an individual at any given point in his or her life. Personal needs may take a priority at certain times, driven by life events, but that doesn't necessarily mean that career ambitions wane.

For example, our research has shown that despite conventional wisdom, having children does not make women less ambitious than men. Instead, ambitions are far more influenced by corporate culture. (See "Dispelling the Myths of the Gender Ambition Gap," BCG article, April 2017). As such, organizations need to ensure that compensation and other rewards encourage alternative working models including part-time work or a change in role. (See the sidebar, "A BCG Senior Partner's Unconventional Path to the Top.")

**Change the support that employees receive.** Companies can help employees in dual-career families by offering new kinds of support to address their unique needs. Programs that are gender-neutral are especially powerful, because they counter the assumption that household duties fall exclusively on the female spouse. For example, rather than offering programs to working mothers, they should be targeted to working parents.

Technology can also be a powerful means of support. Tools such as videoconferencing, virtual collaboration devices, telehealth services, and online networks for employees to share advice on common struggles can support flexible work and provide a support system for dual-career households. Other increasingly popular forms of tactical support include onsite nurseries, backup childcare with locations near work, babysitting referral services, elder-care support, financial planners, and wellness providers.

**I**T'S ALL TOO easy for company leaders to ignore the challenges of employees in dual-career households. To those leaders, we have a simple suggestion to help you and your colleagues see the scope of the issue: at the next town hall meeting, ask for a show of hands from employees who are struggling with these issues. At most organizations, it's easily a majority of the workforce affected, which can have a huge impact on overall performance. Helping employees in dual-career households requires an investment and an ongoing dialogue, but there is a significant payoff in terms of engagement, productivity, recruiting, and retention. It's an investment in a company's most valuable asset—its people.

## A BCG SENIOR PARTNER'S UNCONVENTIONAL PATH TO THE TOP

Debbie Lovich, a senior partner and managing director at BCG—and a coauthor of this article—exemplifies the idea that there are many models of career success. Debbie is part of a dual-career household, in which her husband also works a demanding job as a physician and researcher. At BCG, she rose to a partner position, then decided she wanted to spend more time with her four children. She shifted away from client-facing work, formally resigning as a partner but staying at BCG in an internal role running the operations and

managing the staff of BCG's Boston office. She then left BCG to launch a startup, returning two years later as a senior advisor at the firm, and then she came back fully again as a client-service partner, seven years after she resigned. Two decades ago, this type of career journey would not have been an option. In today's world, it's increasingly normal. This path was supported by BCG, which actively kept in touch with Debbie during her time away from the firm and provided options allowing her to shift from client work to internal roles, and vice versa.

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