DUAL-CAREER CONCESSIONS IN INDUSTRY

The two-body problem crops up less often in industry than in academia, but some employers still take notice — and attempt to help.

According to Corinna Patmore, global recruitment manager for research and development at drug-maker AstraZeneca in London, just 1 in 50 candidates for company research posts mention a spouse or partner. Similarly, at the pharmaceutical company Roche in Basel, Switzerland, the problem comes up just 5% of the time, says Willy Kinzy, senior recruiter for pharmaceutical research and early development. This is explained by the relative youth of job candidates, he says. “Many of our new employees come directly from the universities,” he says. “And most of them are not married.”

Neither company has a formal policy for two-career couples. “We tend to deal with it on a case-by-case basis,” says Patmore. She says AstraZeneca candidates usually reveal that they have a potential two-body dilemma during the initial phone screen, far earlier than is typical in academia. AstraZeneca has hired trailing partners under certain conditions; although the drug-maker won’t create a new research job for a partner, as is often done in academia, it will try to match the partner with an existing position. If no such position is available, the company turns to other employers, including nearby universities and competitors, with whom it collaborates or has some other relationship, Patmore says.

At Roche, Kinzy asks the candidate during the in-person interview whether he or she wishes to address any particular topic that hasn’t been discussed so far. Interviewees who have partners usually bring up the issue then, he says.

Roche has a headhunter on retainer who helps to find jobs for trailing spouses, and it also operates a career centre. If a trailing partner is a good match for a Roche position, she or he gets “some preference” for the post, in the same way as an internal candidate, Kinzy says. “During the oral offer process, we discuss benefits. One of those benefits is spousal career support.”

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industry than in academia (see ‘Dual-career concessions in industry’).

Although the two-body problem is increasingly common worldwide, hiring executives and applicants are often uncertain about how best to handle it during the recruitment process. Yet the tide may be starting to turn in terms of how institutions see and handle the dual-career-couple issue, suggests Londa Schiebinger, director of Stanford’s Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research and lead author of the 2008 dual-career report. In follow-up studies, Schiebinger says she has found that US universities are beginning not only to recognize the dual-career issue officially but also to establish policies and guidelines for handling it. “Dual-career hiring is becoming much easier than it used to be,” she says.

“Things are improving — it is a far more common practice.”

Institutions such as Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have created elaborate web pages explaining how they handle the issue; and some offer dual-career services to work with the trailing partner and try to create a position. At the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Switzerland, an office handles negotiations for both the lead and trailing partner’s potential posts. “Both partners are able to evaluate their situations simultaneously before making a decision,” says Madeleine Luethy, who runs the office. The University of Toronto in Canada creates posts for qualified trailing partners by splitting the cost of the appointment between the provost’s office and the departments hiring the lead and trailing partners. The university hires about 12 trailing partners per year, says Edith Hillan, the vice-provost.

Laying the groundwork

The Lohmanns’ two-body problem was short-lived: the University of Heidelberg soon came up with a top-notch tenured position for Jan. For the past year and a half, Ingrid has been a tenure-track group leader and Jan has chaired a new department. “I’ve done about ten times better here at Heidelberg than Ingrid would have done at the other university,” he says of an earlier package offer he had received in which Ingrid was merely an “add-on.”

To couples struggling with the two-body problem, it may seem as if the Lohmanns had an unusual stroke of good fortune. But the joint offer didn’t come out of nowhere — the Lohmanns had laid the groundwork. Jan turned down the competing offer, and the couple made no secret of the fact that they were a single unit. “We’ve been clear from the outset that we would move somewhere only if we both got an offer,” says Jan.

Recruiters say couples must use deliberate tactics to ensure that both members secure desirable employment. Before even applying for positions, candidates need to determine how specific institutions view the issue — whether they’re receptive to it or at least have clear policies on it, or whether they shrug at a candidate’s partnered status. And, once the application process is under way, candidates must properly time the disclosure of their partnered status (see ‘Negotiating for two’). Such preparations should boost the chances that couples like the Lohmanns can find a two-body solution.

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Negotiating for two

There is no universally accepted method for when and how to broach the two-body problem with recruiters. Karen Kaplan details the options.

One of the biggest dilemmas for a partnered scientist who is seeking a job is determining exactly when to disclose that he or she has a partner with an active research career. Department chairs, hiring executives and the scientists themselves have different opinions on the optimal timing (see ‘When is the partner issue raised?’). And that timing could affect whether applicants secure the desired position.

Although some couples are clear from the beginning about their partnered status (see ‘A dual dilemma’), others say that there are advantages to waiting longer. Spouses Ashley Monks and Melissa Holmes, both faculty members at the University of Toronto in Canada, say that they prefer to disclose the information once one or the other has received an offer. “For me, strategically, the advice is not to tell it at the interview stage,” Holmes says. “This is something that should come up after the university offers the job — when they decide they want one of you.”

But some recruiters suggest otherwise. Although the job-application stage may be too early, many discourage withholding the information until an offer has been received. Gerlind Wallon, manager of the Young Investigator Programme at the European Molecular Biology Organization in Heidelberg, Germany, says that the interview is the best time to bring up the partner issue. European scientists routinely include their marital status on their CV,
Although they are not legally bound to do so, and that could work against them, Wallon warns. “Whether you want it to or not, it is going to influence the recruiter,” she says. “Maybe in a positive way — but maybe not.” Omit that information from the CV and wait until the interview, she advises.

But interviews can be held over multiple days, and some recruiters say that even the timing within that period is crucial. Many hiring managers pinpoint the relaxed setting of an informal one-on-one meeting or dinner with an administrator within a two- or three-day interview period as the most advantageous time to bring up one’s partnered status. “Right then, the wheels can be set in motion for the partner offer,” says Amy Vollmer, professor of biology at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. “If the department wants you badly enough, they’ll go to bat for you.” Hiring managers and others point out that institutions that don’t support dual-career couples probably aren’t the best employers for a partnered couple anyway.

Candidates should recognize that the later they reveal their two-body problem, the more difficult it may be for recruiters to help address it, argues Richard Foust, a long-time recruiter and head of chemistry and biochemistry at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. “The sooner we know, the better the offer we can make to both partners,” he says. When Foust knows about the situation up front, he tries to find or create a position for the trailing partner — often non-tenure-track at first — and include it in the candidate’s offer. Waiting until an actual offer is received could backfire, he says. In one case, Foust extended a verbal offer to a candidate, who then told him about her trailing researcher spouse. “She said she couldn’t take the position until she found out if there was going to be an accommodation for her husband,” recalls Foust. “I said, ‘You have a husband?’ If I had known that ahead of time, the offer would have included positions for both.” The whole hiring process was delayed for months as Foust consulted his dean and tried to come up with an offer package.

Networking can be a good way to relay the information that a candidate is part of a dual-career couple in the course of their careers. Not once has the information out there, “Shah says. “I didn’t have to bring it up because everybody already knew.”

Networking can also help job-seekers to scout out the nuances of a school’s dual-career-couple stance in advance — policies often differ from institution to institution. Applicants might seek insights from advisers, mentors and contacts at different universities, or could try cold-contacting partnered faculty members at an institution of interest to discover how they handled the issue. Many universities in the United States and elsewhere now also have web pages that spell out their policy on two-body hiring (see “Tips for navigating the two-body problem”).

There is another option: don’t bother bringing up the problem at all. Edith Heard, a group leader and department head at the Curie Institute, and her husband Vincent Colot, a group leader and research director at the École Normale Supérieure — both in Paris — have chosen never to broach the topic in the course of their careers. Not once have they worked under the same roof, apart from during a one-year term as visiting professors a few years ago at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York. Heard says that it is probably for the best. “One of us might end up in a situation where he or she is being hired because of the other’s presence, rather than because of the science he or she is doing,” Heard says. “We try to avoid that. We go our separate paths.”

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TIPS FOR NAVIGATING THE TWO-BODY PROBLEM

● Don’t disclose that you have a partner until after the formal, face-to-face interview. Most academics with hiring authority believe that revealing a trailing partner any earlier could jeopardize your chance of getting the post.

● But don’t wait until a verbal or written offer is received. That is too late, say some recruiters — the institution needs enough lead time to create a viable option for the trailing partner.

● Network, especially with mentors and advisers, to learn as much as possible about how institutions treat the two-body problem. Also make sure you check university and organizational web pages.

● Volunteering on a department or university search committee expands your network and is an effective way to learn from the inside how search committees operate and how the hiring process works. This can help in a subsequent job search when deciding when and how to broach the two-body issue.

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