



# How Dual-Career Couples Make it Work

**A conversation with Jennifer Petriglieri, author of *Couples That Work*.**

*Interview by Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour*

**Why did you choose to write this book? What's kept you going through the subject and the process and everything else?**

It's a great question, a question I ask myself sometimes! For the past ten, fifteen years, I've been researching career development and leadership development and I found this pattern as I spoke to people: "tell me about your career journey". They would say: "If you really want to understand my career journey, you need to understand my partner's journey as well." That piqued my interest. I heard it enough times that I felt that there's something in here. As every good academic does, I went to the library and found nothing – nothing out

there. And what's interesting is that this was at a time when the social narrative was shifting. It was the time when Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg were reaching the fore of the narrative in America and the thing that both women said, obviously from very different angles, was that the most important career decision you make is who you marry. There's something a bit icky and transactional about that, but it resonates with a lot of us. It feels true, but is there any evidence that it is true? And the answer was "No". Of course, as an academic, that's great, because there's a wide-open playing field for me to walk into. And being in a dual-career couple myself, I thought, this is personally interesting, and there's obviously a huge need for rigorous

research because there's nothing out there. So it started with a very academic research project. I published academic papers, and eventually it became a book as I collected more and more data. Writing an academic paper, you have to pick a little piece of the puzzle, but I wanted to write out the whole story, and that's how the book was born.

**You interviewed about 150 couples. What proportion of them are in the book?**

Less than you would think actually, because the book takes a narrative approach. To tell the full narrative of a couple takes lots of pages. I haven't calculated exactly, but it's probably 20%-ish. Each chapter has one main story of a couple, and then three or four smaller narratives. Indeed, all the data was used to form the theory and the patterns and thinking in the book.

**Your sample, the individuals you interviewed, come from all over the world. Did you notice differences or trends relating to dual-careers?**

Surprisingly few actually! I sometimes think of this iceberg metaphor: what you can see on the surface can look quite different, but the dynamics underneath are rather universal. I have to be careful using that word: nothing is completely universal. But when we look underneath those real dynamics around the power sharing in the couple, and whose career takes priority, it really cuts across. Obviously we see some cultural differences; for example in some countries of the world, some Asian countries, some Middle Eastern countries, some African countries, it's very normal for grandparents to do a lot of child care duty, which takes the pressure off the parents. We see regional dynamics like this, which can either increase or decrease the pressure for dual-career couples. But those fundamental relationship dynamics are very similar across ages, races, religion, whether it's a gay couple, a straight couple, there are very similar dynamics underneath.



**Jennifer Petriglieri**

Jennifer is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, and the author of *Couples That Work*, a book on how dual-career couples can thrive in love and in work. Her award-winning research and teaching focus on identity, leadership, and career development. At INSEAD she directs the Management Acceleration Programme and the Women Leaders Programme. She has been shortlisted for the Thinkers50 New Thinker and Talent awards, and named one of the world's best 40 business school professors under 40 by Poets & Quants.

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**What can you tell us about the notion of dual-career couples today across the world?**

It's interesting because if you rewind to the 1970's the term didn't even exist. The first writings on it called it a deviant professional lifestyle – yeah, imagine that! Fast forward to today, if we look at North America, the West, more than two thirds of professionals who are in couples are in dual-career couples. That's no longer being deviant, it's now the norm. Those proportions differ a bit by country, and by generation. If we look at the under 40's, under 45's, that's a much higher proportion than the older generations. With each generation that comes through, that proportion grows. There's a really interesting question: "Why?" I think there are few reasons. One is economics, quite frankly. Jobs are not as stable, there's not that much certainty, so you're hedging your risks if you both work. I also think our sense of what makes a meaningful life has changed. Many people, for good or for bad, see work as an integral, meaningful part of their lives. The idea that one partner would give up on that doesn't sit well with that idea. People want both pieces of the

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pie. Likewise, what’s interesting when we look at the data, is that although we tend to think – stereotypically – that women want to do the childcare, if you look at the younger generations, it’s very equal in terms of people’s desire to spend time with children, and to be at home. There’s a balancing out that we can see across the generations, and it’s not going away.

**I guess it’s not. One of the things we looked at in our book was the taking of breaks, and the return after the breaks. Did you discover anything particularly significant about the way couples decide who’s going to take the longer break, how it’s going to be portioned out, and what the challenges are for either gender returning?**

I think there’s two kinds of breaks: there’s parental breaks, or some kind of family break, and then there’s career breaks, to retrain, etc. I see those as quite different. Obviously the parental break is still a majority of women doing this – that is changing quite rapidly – but it’s still a majority women. There’s a lot of data around this. We know that if a woman takes more than two years out, it is extremely difficult to get back in. That is borne out in my data. What I saw in my data was that very often couples didn’t quite understand that, when they got into such a situation, and then regretted it later, or they were making that choice based off a financial calculation without thinking of the long-term finances. “Right now, a lot of my salary is going on childcare, so it doesn’t make sense” without thinking about the future, the cumulative impact, if you like, on your career going forward. That’s very specific to parental breaks. I think what’s interesting is the career breaks to retrain. If we think our careers are expanding in time, most of us are not going to retire at 60 or 65 anymore, we’re going to go on working. If we think we have a 40 or 50-year career span, no one is going to be in the same

job all the way through. All of us need to take time to retrain, to reorient. What’s fascinating is that being in a dual-career couple buys you the opportunity to do precisely that. There’s this sense of turn-taking: “You’re taking time right now, but later we’ll flip back.” One of the huge advantages for dual-career couples is that they can take that time. What I also found was that one person’s time out in reorientation would often spark the next. It wasn’t an isolated “You do this then I do mine”, it was “You do this, but then that sparks doing my own and pushing me further.” There was very much a cyclical dynamic going on between the couples.

**From your research, you found that there were three main models of contracting among the couples. Amazingly, one model seems to work better than the others. Would you mind elaborating on your three models, and the insights that you brought out of that?**

Traditionally, when we think of dual-career couples, we think of primary and secondary; who has the primary career, and who has the secondary. Often, what we read in the press, or what we hear in lectures, is that you need to choose who’s going to take the primary and who’s going to take the secondary. Of course traditionally, it was the man who took the primary and the woman who took the secondary. However there are two other models that people are using; one is a turn-taking model where we take turns in the primary position and then flip, and the other is what I call a double primary which is; we’re both really going to push our careers, but we’re going to have boundaries set around it – maybe we’ll just live in Paris, or no one is going to travel more than a certain percentage of time – some boundaries to enable that to happen. On the surface, when you look at those two models, you think the third is very difficult. But what I found was that couples who did the third were, on average, though obviously

some people were happy in the other boxes, more satisfied with their careers and their relationships. The question then is “Why?” because on the surface you think, “That’s a little bit odd, this feels very stressful.” What I found was that it actually isn’t the model at all that was leading to that. It was what it was leading to that was; because they had the boundaries in place, they had to have very explicit conversations around what the model was. When I looked at couples in the other two models who were also very successful, they were couples who had those explicit conversations. The problem with the other two models is that you can fall into them without necessarily having to have those conversations. The secret sauce, if you like, is conversation – not the model itself. I think that’s really good news, because it’s so annoying when we’re told by academics and practitioners “This is the one thing you need to do”. It’s just impossible that one thing can work across the board. What my research shows is that actually any model can work, as long as it’s been explicitly negotiated. It’s the process you take which is vital, as opposed to the thing you pick.

**It’s about dialogue, and it has to be explicit...**

Yes. What’s interesting is when you talk to them separately, many couples thought they had an agreement, but when I spoke to the other half, the agreement was quite different. It’s about being very explicit about what is the agreement.

**Would you mind sharing your story of when your, then future, husband met you in Italy with the notebook, and made you start that process very early on?**

Like many couples in our late 20’s early 30’s we had plenty of other relationships, and I think when we got together we were like, “we’re going to do this differently.” From the get-go, we sat down: it was very romantic – it was on a Sicilian beach which always feels so romantic, and it is – with a notepad and pen and just found some time, on our own, writing what we really wanted out of this relationship, and what

were some of the things we were worried might happen. Having a conversation around that – and we actually still have the piece of paper which is quite cute! – that sparked, really, our lifetime of conversations around these things. But it wasn’t around, “We want to have two kids, and we want to do this, that and the other.” It was more fundamental, like “What are our values in life? What do we really want out of life? Who do we want to become?” Many people say “Communication is key in a relationship”. Yes, but it matters what you talk about. I think a lot of couples communicate a lot, but not necessarily about the things that matter. They’ll talk about who’s going to pick the kids up, and these practical, day-to-day things – which of course are important, we need to talk about those – but they’re missing that deeper layer of “What do we really want? What direction are we going in? What are we doing here?”



**The three transitions that you describe in the different chapters, how would you characterize and explain them to someone who doesn’t have time to read the book, or wants a quick cheat-sheet? And do they always happen in sequence?**

Of course the practical things matter, but as I said earlier, what I’m interested in in the book is finding out what’s really going on under the surface of the relationship. What I found was that these dynamics, it’s not like these couples are dealing with them all the time. Sometimes, they’re more in the background, sometimes they come to the fore – and the times when they do come to the fore are relatively predictable. There are really three key times when they become really salient, and couples have to deal with



them. This is what I call in the book the three transitions. The first one always occurs – whether we couple at 18 or 88 – it usually happens within the first five-ish years of the relationship. As we get older it tends to happen sooner, because we have more complex lives to fit together. Maybe if we're younger and more carefree it takes a bit longer. But this first transition is about how do we make these two independent lives we have into dependent ones.

on these two independent paths. The first transition is all about negotiating that interdependent path. What couples often get wrong is to do that at the practical level; how do we figure out our schedules, how do we figure out chores around the house. Let me be clear: those things are important – but they're not the thing that's going to get you through the transitions successfully. It's about the career prioritization we've just been talking about: "What's our

## **“There needs to be some interdependence such that my decisions reinforce yours and your decisions reinforce mine.”**

Whatever stage in life we have – me in my mid 40's, maybe we're coming out of a marriage and we have kids and career – or whether the kids have left home and we're later in life – or whether we're early 20's-mid 20's and things are very carefree – whenever we come into a new relationship, we've got used to having very independent lives. To really become a couple, those need to become interdependent. I use that word very carefully because it's not about having a merged life, it's not about having one life. But it's also not about simply making the paths go in parallel. There needs to be some interdependence such that my decisions reinforce yours and your decisions reinforce mine. Very often the first transition is triggered by some event. For example, if we think of the younger couples who have quite carefree lives, it tends to be triggered perhaps by the arrival of a first child – you know, we've got to sort things out then – maybe it's a big career transition, like you talk about in your book, in terms of a geographic move opportunity or something that really needs a rethink. I think the reason the first transition happens sooner in couples who are a bit older when they get together is that we have more complex lives. So very soon we run into events where, "Crikey, we need to sort things out". It's not about the event itself; the event is just the trigger that makes us realise that we cannot be a couple, we cannot carry on

commitment?", "What are our boundaries?", "Are there geographic zones which are out, which are in?" All these conversations need to happen there, to really give us a path we can walk on together. That's the first transition, and again that happens for every couple. The second transition is really linked to a life stage which has become known as the mid-life crisis. What's interesting in that is when it was first called "crisis" by Carl Jung and others, it was meant in a very positive way, because it's a time of huge developmental growth. There's no set age, but it tends to happen at around late 30's to late 40's, roughly. Again, for some people it happens a bit earlier, for some later, so it's not an exact time. All couples go through the first transition, and if couples are together in that period, they will also go through the second transition. What's interesting is couples who get together in that period often go through two transitions rather close together. They sort themselves out, and at the same time, it's really figuring out. That second transition is very much about "What do we really want from life?" All of us did this. It's easy for those of us who are past this stage to roll our eyes, but in our 20's and 30's, most of us are on some kind of train. We've gone onto a track, we're motoring along it, we're trying to grow our careers, we're having children, there's one thing after the other. Then there tends to be a point somewhere around our late 30's to late

40's where we stop and think: "Why am I really doing this?" There's a lot being written on that individually. But what I write about in the second transition is what does that do to a couple. Of course, when you have two people with careers, there's two people going through this at the same time, really reconsidering what they want out of life. Of course that has a knock-on effect on their relationship, because often, what enables our career is our relationship and if we want that career to shift, there needs to be a shift in the relationship to support that transition to what I call a more individualized path. What I mean by that is a path

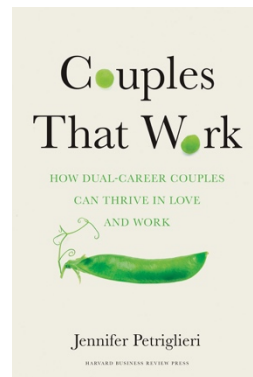


which feels more "mine", it's not the "I became an engineer because that's what smart kids do in my country" or "My mom did this so I'm going to do that as well." It's really what's the path I really want to be on? There's a lot of quite difficult dynamics to deal with in a couple at this time. It's interesting because if you actually track the divorce statistics, of course it's not a linear curve, we know there are peaks and troughs, and this does tend to be a big, peak time for divorces. I think that's no surprise because it's a time when we're really rethinking our lives holistically, not just our careers, and not necessarily in sync. The question is "Can we manage that together?" One of the things I talk about in the book for example is the importance of how we can support each other's development in that and how couples who can do well through that transition are couples who can really tolerate the anxiety of not knowing, the anxiety of "well can you not just decide what you want to do and tell me and then we go for it?" and really fully support each other to take that time to

explore and grow and develop, and then shift direction. That's the second transition. The third transition, again, is a little more linked to life stage, although it's a broad sweep. It tends to happen when we get to that point when we feel somehow more senior. It's a time with lots of role changes. It could be in the personal life, maybe our children leave home and we take on a different role socially. Often that also coincides with the realization that we're no longer the bright young things, we're no longer on the high potential list, people are coming to us for mentoring and support, we're seen as the "éminence grise", if I can put it that way. It sparks a lot of questionings, really quite deep identity questions around "Who am I now? What about my legacy? I may still have a good amount of time in career to make a change, but if I want to do something, the time is now." There's a bit more of a sense of urgency at that stage. "I've maybe got one chance left to make a major shift – what's it going to be?" At the time, people's horizons tend to broaden. Even in the second transition, people still tend to be focused on career, plus family – that's it. But when we get to that third transition, it tends to be quite a bit broader. It might be – yes, career and family – but it's also about my personal interests and pursuits. It might be very often about giving back to the community, it's a time when people take on side projects, it might be small projects like being on the board of a not-for-profit for example, it could be some volunteer work. It tends to be a time when our horizons broaden, and we can really go for a much more holistic reinvention than in our earlier years when – let's face it – we have a lot of responsibilities – big mortgage, kids, big teams to manage, et cetera et cetera. So the third transition is really a deeper level still than the first two transitions which is this identity level. What's interesting is more and more frequently we see that dual-career couples at that stage are starting to do things together. This is the stage when – maybe not all of their jobs, but some start little businesses together, others have side projects together. There is a trend when some couples' paths meet and touch at some points in this, and they have some side projects together. That's really an identity transition.

**Do you see companies that do good things to help and support dual-careers?**

Not many, if I'm honest. Let's come back to the issue first to understand it. The issue is that almost all organisations' talent management processes – even if they are new organisations like a Google or a Facebook, one of the tech organisations which are young organisations – they are very much based on the logic of what sociologists called the “ideal worker” which is a guy who has a stay-at-home wife who takes care of everything, so they can dedicate themselves 100% to work. Now, companies will deny this. But if you look at the talent management processes, there are these kinds of lockstep rotations where “I'm going to send you to China for three years” – so very lockstep transitions that tend to be quite rigid paths to the top. For example, “Well our current CEO did this, so if you want to get to the top, that's the way you get to the top.” There is also this real irony at the moment in that we live in a world where we could all flexi-work. There is the technology and things like never before and yet we're in a world where we do more face time in the office than ever before. There is a stigmatisation of flexible working. Even though we could, and in fact we know the productivity benefits are extremely high, it's stigmatised. And so these two problems are combining to make a lot of inertia in organisations. Even organisations who seem quite dedicated, because this logic runs deep underneath the talent management systems, they're changing things around the organisation – I'm sure you know well, organisations will have amazing flexible work policies – but if you take them, you're passed over for promotion. And when I talk about flexible work, I'm not talking about working two days a week or something, I'm talking working from home a little bit of the time, but, again, it's a career killer. So organisations are pretty stuck at the moment, because they can't get past this logic. I think this is more about a cultural shift than about processes and procedures. Because in many cases, the processes and procedures are there: they're just not being used – and that's the problem. What we see is rather than whole organisations having cracked this, we see



In *Couples that Work*, Jennifer Petriglieri shifts away from the language of sacrifice and trade-offs and focuses on how couples can successfully tackle the challenges they will face throughout their lives--together.

microclimates within organisations. It tends to be where the head is also in a dual-career couple. So they ‘get it’, if I can put it that way. It's really interesting because it mirrors – there is a lovely paper that looks at biases among senior male managers, and of course the least biased (senior male managers) are those with partners who work or with daughters who work. It's because they understand it through their skin. If we haven't lived it, it's very hard to understand. This is where the shift in generations will help us, because the reality is that many of these people in the older generations in organisations right now haven't lived that life. How can they understand? It's a big ask to really understand what this means. Hopefully that will change as the generations go through.

**Do you see organisations looking for help in this area? Is there any proactive demand for this, either to you or to others?**

Yes, you are beginning to see this with the progressive organisations. Things like the consultancies, the organisations which take in a lot of high level talent. The people at the cutting edge are really getting onto this. I think this is really the frontier of top talent management at the moment. For example, speaking to one of the consultancies earlier this week, they said they've

identified this as the next thing they need to crack. What we usually see is those organisations tend to be the vanguard, and then the others will follow. What's important for organisations to recognise is: there has been a lot of focus on women in business, as we know, over the last few years, which is needed and very important. But dual-career couples is about all talent. What people don't recognise is that marriage patterns have changed. If you rewind, there is this lovely study around the

these highly talented people can vote with their feet. At the moment, there's a lot of power in the supplier of talent.

**With talent becoming scarcer, there's going to be a much stronger pressure for companies to do something about it.**

I spoke to a very senior woman in a big pharmaceutical company a couple of weeks ago. She was in her late 30's and getting married for the first time. She was already very senior in her career.

## **“If you hire high talent, you want to bet their spouse is just as high.”**

distance between the two partners' parents houses when they get married. Forty fifty years ago, it was less than a mile: you married the boy, or the girl next door. Now, obviously it depends by country, but it's more than sixty miles. We don't like the boy next door anymore, so who do we like? Essentially what's happening is something sociologists call 'assortative mating' which is an awful term but it means that we are pairing with someone who is extremely close to us on educational level, potential and also ambition level. Whereas before you would see the doctor marry the nurse, or the PhD marry the assistant, that would never happen anymore. You get the really high-level talent marrying the really high-level talent. And it's companies like the consultancies, who are hiring that talent, that are really starting to realize this because they feel the pinch. The other organisations are a bit slower, because 20-30 years ago, if you hired a high talent, the odds were their partner may not be (a high talent) or may have a job. Right now, if you hire high talent, you want to bet their spouse is just as high, if not even higher talent than they are. That's a really big change in the sociological make-up of society which I don't think a lot of organisations have really cottoned on to yet.

**It's a big opportunity then?**

It is a big opportunity. What you see is that

Her husband is in the IT industry – also very senior. Her colleagues didn't know about him, and they made the assumption that he would move for her. It's not so much the assumption about the gendered aspect, it's the assumption that if you are high talent, then obviously you have a stay at home partner.

**As we look into the future in terms of evolution of the world of work, and all the trends that we're aware of, including AI and machine learning, how do you foresee dual-career couples evolving over time?**

If current trends are anything to go by, it's already the norm, it's going to become more prevalent. Certainly it's not going away. It will increase as time goes on. In terms of the new world of work, it's difficult to predict how this will change it. On the one hand, the new world of work should enable us to work more flexibly, so should make it easier – but we know that it's not. The logic is not bearing out in the marketplace. It's difficult to see what will happen. Even jobs which could be done 100% of the time from home – which I don't think is a healthy thing as I think we need those interactions – we know that's not happening at all. It's an interesting situation because potentially and logically, things should become easier. Actually, the world of work seems to be pulling in the opposite direction, from the underlying



technological trends. I would be very interested to find out what happens.

**Would you see the so-called “Gen Z” as having different expectations, different values, different purposes in their work and personal life?**

It's difficult. There's a lot being made about how different they are. When you talk to demographers, there's a lot less difference than is hyped. They are less willing to put up with things that our generation did, they're less willing to just put the hours in. They can also be very committed to work. It's hard to say. They're possibly more likely to vote with their feet if things aren't working out. Certainly, the level of dual-career couples will be higher than ever before.

**You said very clearly: “I interviewed a lot of people, most of them didn't want to have their real names used. They wanted to be anonymized.” That raised a question – philosophically –, if we don't learn to share more openly about these kinds of intimate things, if we don't allow ourselves to be named or shown, what does that say to our ability to evolve?**

I think we need to separate out academic research. Anonymity is a norm in academic research. I would be careful to extrapolate the fact that it doesn't reflect the expectation. However, whenever I present my work, people come to me afterwards and say “I thought I was the only one!” I do think there is something to your question in terms of – it's not that talked about. I think the reason it's not is that in our society right now, we have something which we never had in the past – which is the sense that

love and work are very separate. So it's okay to talk about struggles at work, and it's okay to talk about struggles with the kids, or whatever at home. But, the intersection – people just don't talk about it. I always ask people “Why?” Often times they just say “Well I just thought no one else struggled with it!” Part of it is, in some cases maybe embarrassment – since it is quite intimate, the relationship with your partner and things – but I think a lot of it is we get ourselves into a cycle of thinking “It's just me. It's got to be me. I know that everyone struggles a bit with the housework, I know people struggle with career planning.” But the real intersection of the deeper stuff about our relationship – who gets priority, who has the power to decide – that can be very isolating because it's a topic that we just don't talk about a lot. There's a chicken and egg scenario: it's not talked about so people don't talk about it. But when you get people to talk, they are very willing to talk about it. If you look on the bookshelves of your nearest big bookstore, there's lots of books on work-life balance, but what they really mean is “How do you get all the chores done and have a career?” There's lots of books on career management, but there's just nothing on the intersection of our relationships and our careers. This comes back to the first question of why did I decide to write this book! That's why there's so much excitement about the book, because it's really the first one which looks at that intersection on a deeper level.

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