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Making It Work:

How Dual-Career Couples Find Career Fulfillment



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Authors

Jill Zucker is a
Senior Partner in
the New York Office

Marie-Claude Nadeau
is a Partner in
the San Francisco Office

Asilah Azil is an
Engagement Manager in
the Singapore Office

Billy Bennett is an
Engagement Manager in
the San Francisco Office

Making It Work: How Dual-Career Couples Find Career Fulfillment

“Congratulations!”

The emails are flooding your inbox. You've just been selected for a coveted new position in the company you've worked at for seven long, loyal years. There's just one problem: the new position is in Singapore.

Moving to Singapore might be exciting and exotic, but you and your spouse love New York. You've always promised each other that you'd make a life here, that moving elsewhere was out of the question. And her career, in a job she loves, is here in NYC, too.

As co-workers stop by to offer their best wishes, you struggle to answer. You want this new job, but how can you make it work—and your marriage work, too?



Does this sound familiar? The struggle to balance two demanding careers may seem like a “first-world problem,” but it’s a dilemma that many employees face every day. McKinsey & Company’s recent study of over 35,000 workers with spouses or live-in partners in a variety of professional sectors found that 89 percent of women and 70 percent of men can be counted as “dual-career couples” (“DCC”)—couples in which both partners have jobs—as opposed to “single career couples” (“SCC”). With some variation, the incidence of DCCs is high in all racial and ethnic groups, with Asian men being least likely to be part of a DCC and Asian women being most likely (Exhibit 1). These couples come from all income levels (Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 1

Women and Men in DCCs and SCCs by race/ethnic group

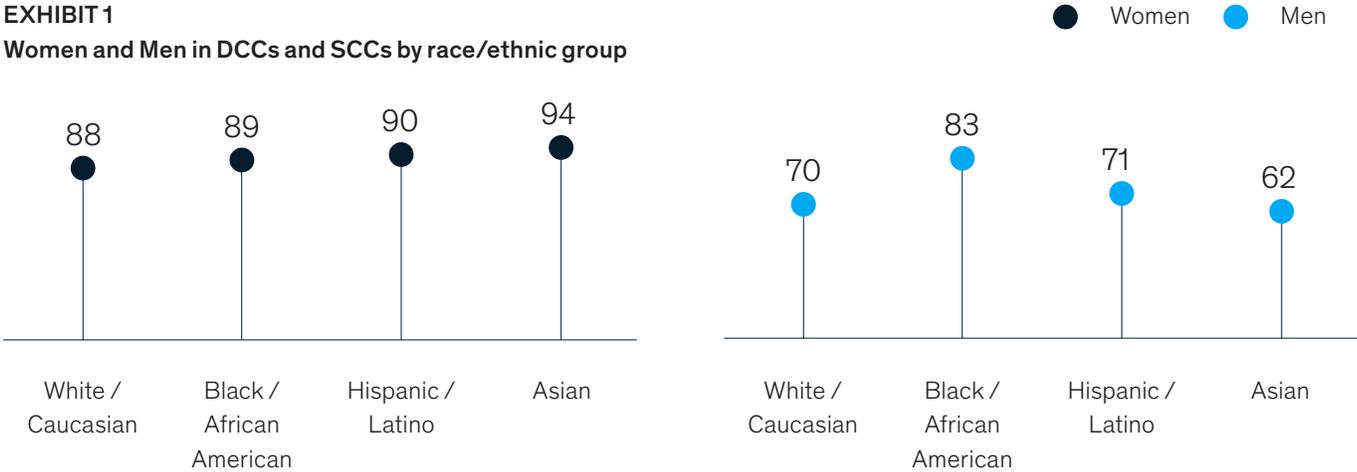
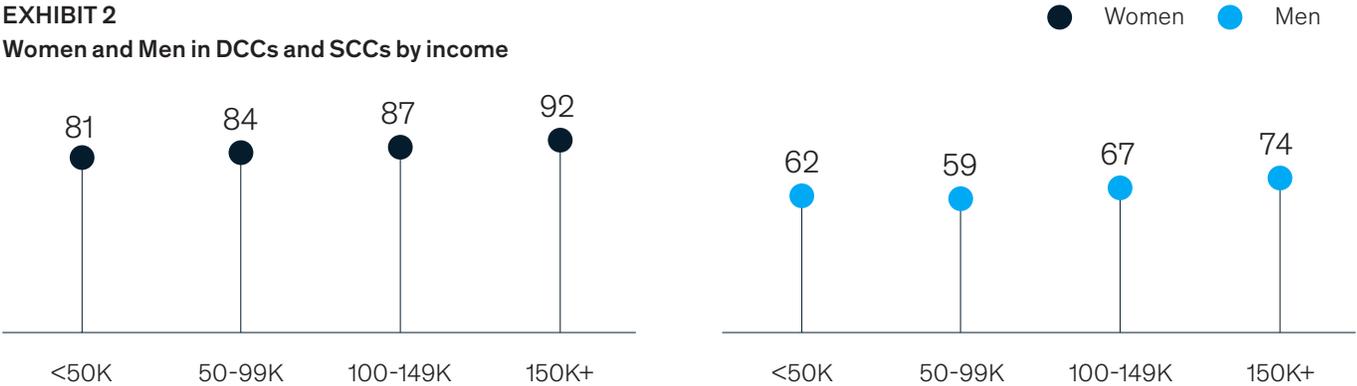


EXHIBIT 2

Women and Men in DCCs and SCCs by income



Of course, many of those in dual-career couples have no choice but to work because they need two incomes to support their household. But for some couples, both partners work by choice, and career fulfillment is a top priority for them. These DCCs often struggle to find such fulfillment because the demands of work, home, and their partner’s career can be overwhelming and sometimes even conflicting priorities. Indeed, when McKinsey conducted interviews with executives in DCCs, many lamented the difficulty of juggling so much at once. As a female executive at a large tech company observed, “[In the past], one person in most couples was 100

percent focused on the home life, but it's no longer like that. Yet jobs expect 100 percent [of your focus], and as much as you try to hire help to cover things at home, the math just doesn't work out." Companies can do more to help these dual-career couples succeed and thrive at work and at home.

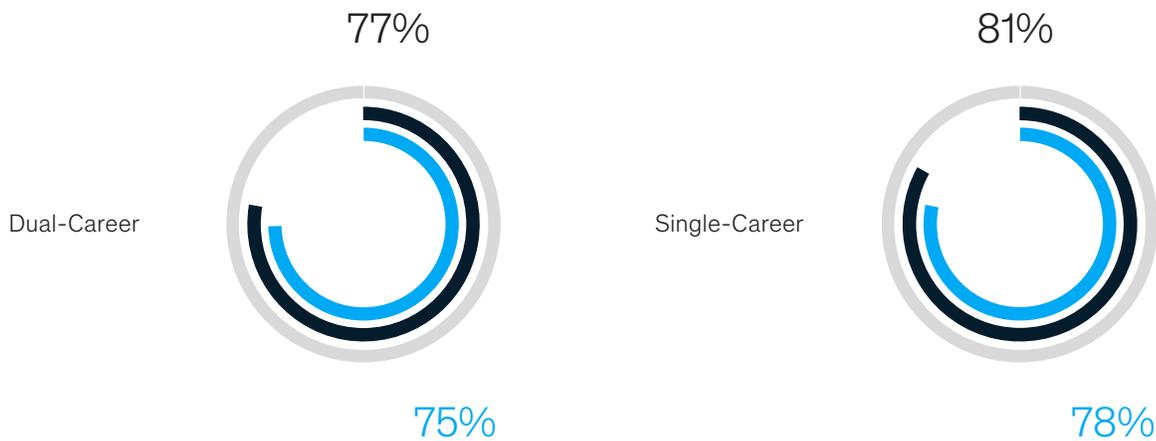
Does job satisfaction suffer?

The constant tug of war between work and home may be undermining DCCs' ability to find satisfaction in their jobs. In McKinsey's survey, employees in DCCs are less likely to report being "happy with their job" than their peers in single-career couples (Exhibit 3).

EXHIBIT 3

Men and women who are happy with their job, %

● Women ● Men



Perhaps the juggling act is simply too stressful, or DCCs lack the time to search for something better when they're unhappy in their current position. When asked what drives her overall happiness and satisfaction at work, the president of a global not-for-profit organization replied, "Meaningful work. It has to make a difference in the world, [it has to be something] I'm passionate about. [That's what] led me out of practicing law at a big commercial law firm to working on women's rights."

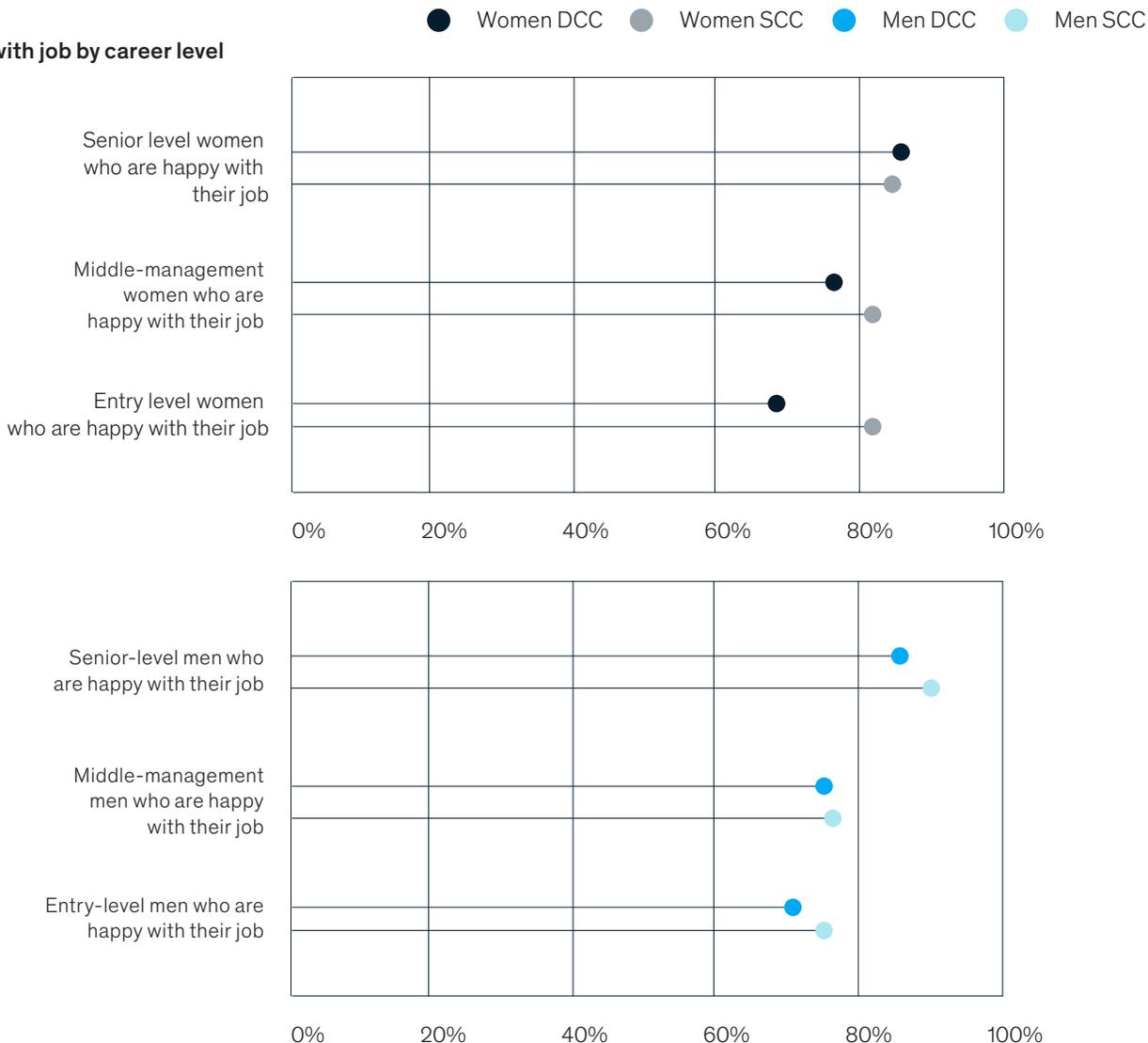
These challenges may even contribute to the lack of women in the C-suite, where only one in five executives are female. As Anna Marrs, President, Global Commercial Services at American Express, noted, "[Being in a DCC sometimes] felt like a personal problem that I had to deal with, because my male peers with whom I was 'competing' didn't have the same problem. My main mentor at the time was a woman, and her husband didn't work."

Perseverance pays off

The research suggests that those who persevere through these challenges in the middle of their career arc find satisfaction in the end. DCCs' happiness with their job increases as they advance through the ranks to senior levels, while SCCs' happiness levels mostly stay the same (except among senior-level men in SCCs) (Exhibit 4). Some of this increase in happiness may stem from the fact that DCCs' children—if they are parents—have gotten older and are perhaps leaving the nest, leaving the family less “stretched” for time and resources.

EXHIBIT 4

Happiness with job by career level



Those earlier years, however, can be quite harried for employees in DCCs, especially when children are part of the mix. “It’s a big mess for about a decade. Someone described it to me as a rush hour of life” said Marrs. But if these couples can find jobs they love that offer them enough flexibility to power through the “rush hour” years, they are likely to come out successful and happy on the other side—and to remain loyal to their employer. Companies can take steps to give these employees the support they need to not only survive the rush, but also to thrive in their positions and ultimately benefit the bottom line.

How companies can support DCCs

To foster the success of employees in DCCs, companies should make sure that these employees enjoy equal access to opportunities for growth and development, promotions and career advancement, management support for work-life balance, and sponsorship opportunities.

1. Provide supportive managers and ensure equitable opportunities, especially for lower-level workers

Overall, employees in DCCs are more likely than SCCs to have managers who help them balance work and personal demands, help develop new skills, and identify opportunities for growth and development (Exhibit 5), and most feel as if they have as many opportunities for growth and development as their peers (Exhibit 6).

EXHIBIT 5

Men and women who report that their manager, %

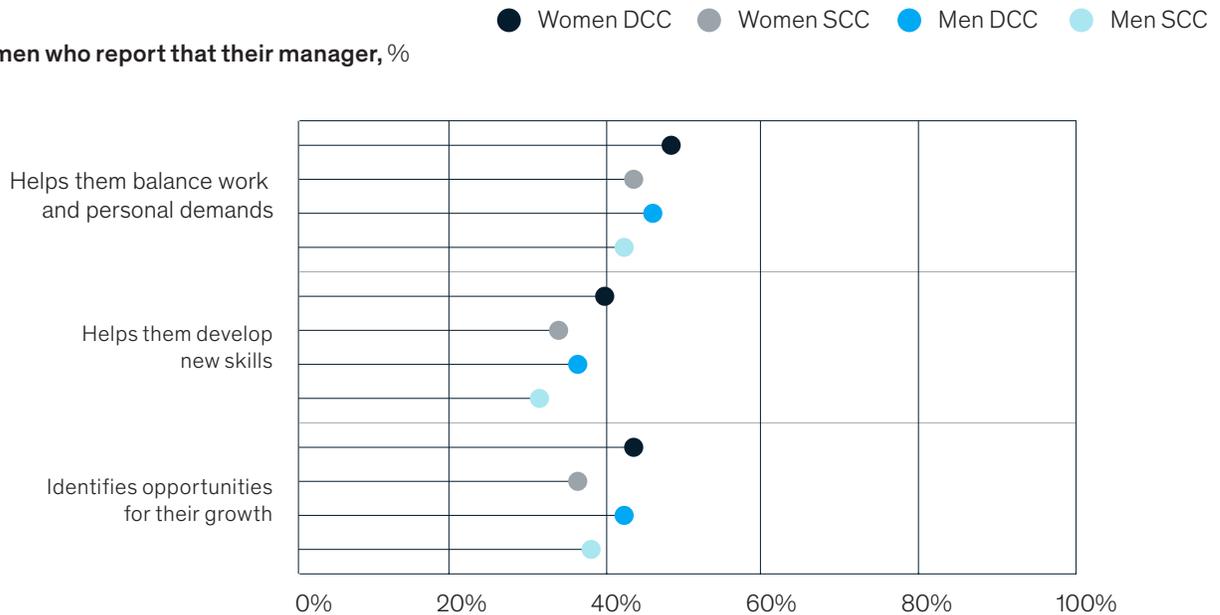
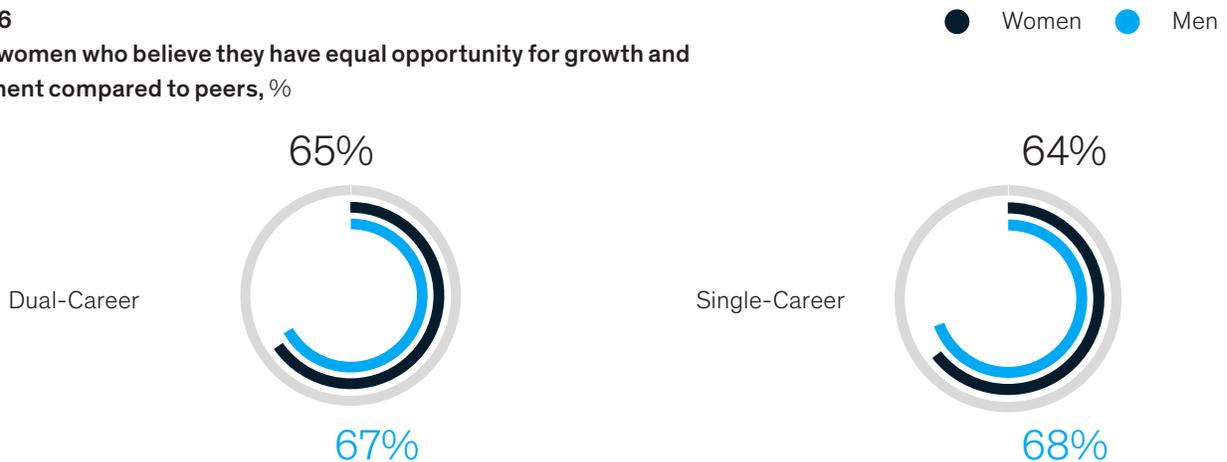


EXHIBIT 6

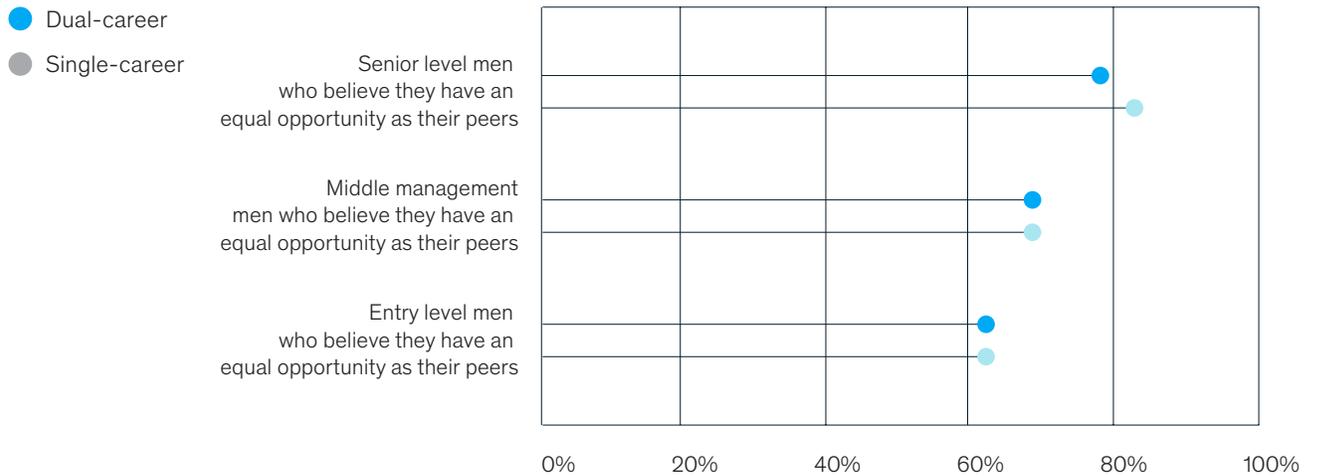
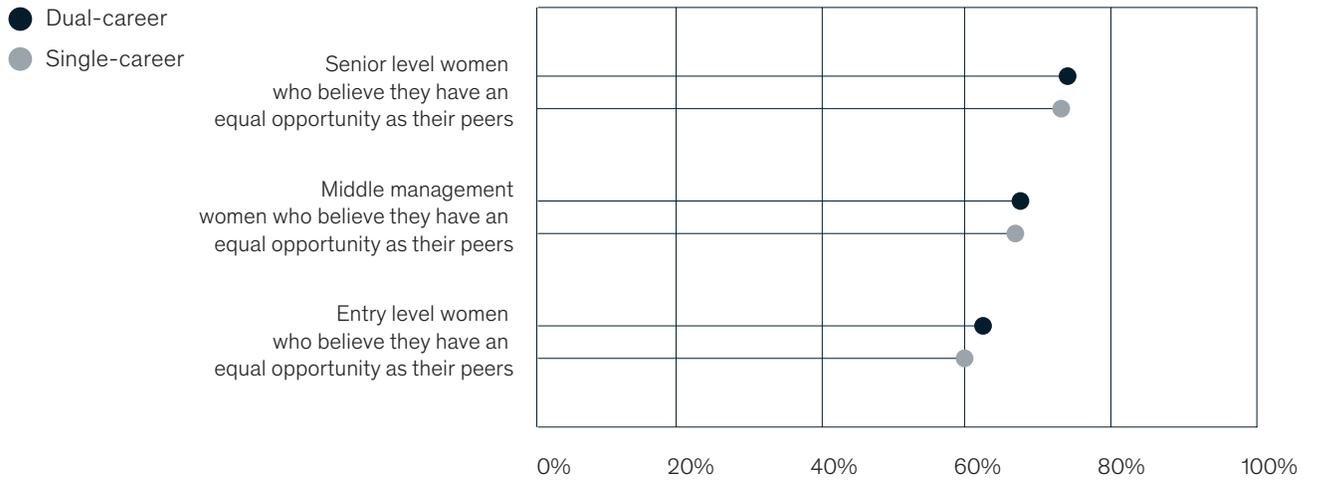
Men and women who believe they have equal opportunity for growth and development compared to peers, %



The majority of both DCCs and SCCs, however, do not report having managers who possess these attributes. And for both DCCs and SCCs, a sizable percentage of men and women in entry-level positions do not feel that they have equal opportunity for growth and development as their peers (Exhibit 7). Fortunately, this situation seems to improve with time, as workers advance through the ranks.

EXHIBIT 7

Men and women who believe they have equal opportunity for growth and development compared to peers by level, %



A lack of supportive managers could be felt more acutely by DCCs who are struggling to balance work and life. This, along with lower-level workers' sense that they lack equal access to such opportunities, may be driving down DCCs' job-satisfaction numbers overall. Ensuring that these workers enjoy opportunities at equal rates as their peers—in ways that are feasible for their busy lives—could boost job satisfaction among DCCs and ultimately ensure that these workers stay with their employers for the long haul.



BRRRRRINGGGGG!

The importance of teamwork

Your alarm shrills. You stumble to the coffee maker and press “start,” then hurry to your kids’ bedrooms to clap and sing them out of a sleepy stupor. You groggily pour them some Cheerios—barely preventing the youngest from spilling milk all over the kitchen counter—as your spouse appears, sleepily fumbling for a bowl. Suddenly the phone rings, and you’re stricken by panic as you remember: you have an early meeting this morning. Who will take the kids to school? Your partner can’t do it this time; he has a long commute and a meeting of his own.

You race for the shower while he finds a video for the kids to watch so you can both get ready for work uninterrupted. Once showered, you run, still dripping, to the phone to beg a neighbor to take the kids to school. Your neighbor agrees, and you breathe a temporary sigh of relief... until the next mini-crisis, which could happen at any moment. The race has begun.

This hectic scenario is all too typical for many of the dual-career executive couples we interviewed, many of whom had children. They work hard to make their dual careers work—and they succeed because they do it together. The couples interviewed have a distinctive team spirit, a sense that they are in this race together for the long haul. A senior partner at McKinsey strives with his wife, the president of a global not-for-profit organization, to support the other’s success. “It’s always been a co-pilot situation,” he said.

For a female executive at a global firm, a dual-career marriage is about complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses: “I help [my husband’s] career [by] networking, mingling at events, [and giving] marketing and reviews advice. He’s great at communicating as a lawyer and has helped me with things.”

“It is vital, of course, that both partners share the commitment to a dual career and take pride in that. If either one has doubts, you’re dead,” said Karen Gordon, Managing Partner of Portfolio Operations at L Catterton, a private equity firm. She cited this shared goal as the key to DCC success: “If either one has doubts, it’s important to align on the notion that you’re both

happiest when you work and prioritize your family.”

These couples found countless practical ways to “make it work” as they progressed through their dual careers. As one example, the president of the not-for-profit organization described staffing up to make it all happen: “[We have a] housekeeper, and we live in a building with staff [who make] deliveries and open the door. Otherwise, someone would need to be there. [Having] assistants [is] very helpful. We need a lot of infrastructure—accountants and investment advisors.”

It helps to be highly organized, too. Karen Gordon and her spouse coordinate their calendars at least weekly, for example. “We sit down most Sundays and go through our calendars for the coming week. We figure out who can cover at home. For example, I’m driving my kids to Boston to visit [colleges] this week, and my husband is driving them [to visit another college] next week,” she said.

Anna Marrs and her husband, an attorney, made it through the early “rush hour” years by having “clear workstreams” assigned to each. “For example, if one of us took care of car insurance first, that person would do car insurance from then on,” she explained. She and her husband carefully planned their mornings, evenings, and weekends as well.

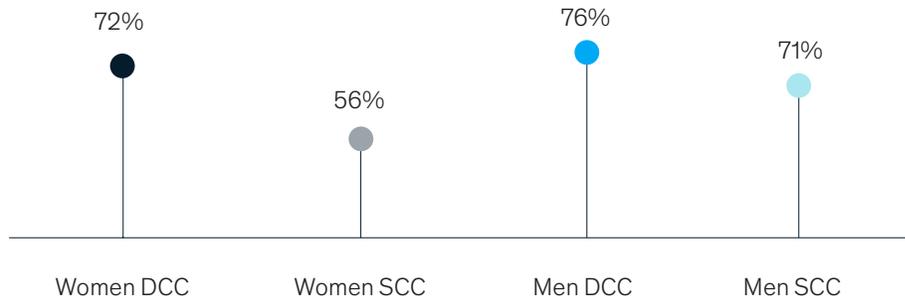
While balancing two high-powered careers is challenging, the DCCs interviewed find that the extra effort is well worth it. The financial services executive noted that being in a DCC has actually helped her career: “Because we both work, there are times when I feel I can take more risk, and the same [goes] for him.” The senior partner at McKinsey agreed that balancing two careers has not held him and his wife back. “The sky’s the limit,” he declared. “We are on a two-seater submarine. We go full-tilt.”

2. Encourage ambition by making top positions seem feasible

In general, employees in DCCs are ambitious—even more so than their peers in SCCs. In particular, women in DCCs are substantially more ambitious than women in SCCs to be promoted to the next level—by a gap of 16 percentage points (Exhibit 8).

EXHIBIT 8

Men and women in DCCs and SCCs who are eager to be promoted to the next level, %



Women in DCCs are also substantially more eager than their female peers in SCCs to want to be top executive (Exhibit 9). Still, only a minority of DCCs wants to attain this goal, and fewer women than men aspire to it. The reason may be simple: many workers in DCCs believe that top executive responsibilities might come at a cost too high for their families. Indeed, the top reason respondents in DCCs cited for not wanting a top-executive position was “it would require too much of my family” (Exhibit 10).

EXHIBIT 9

Men and women who want to be top executives, %

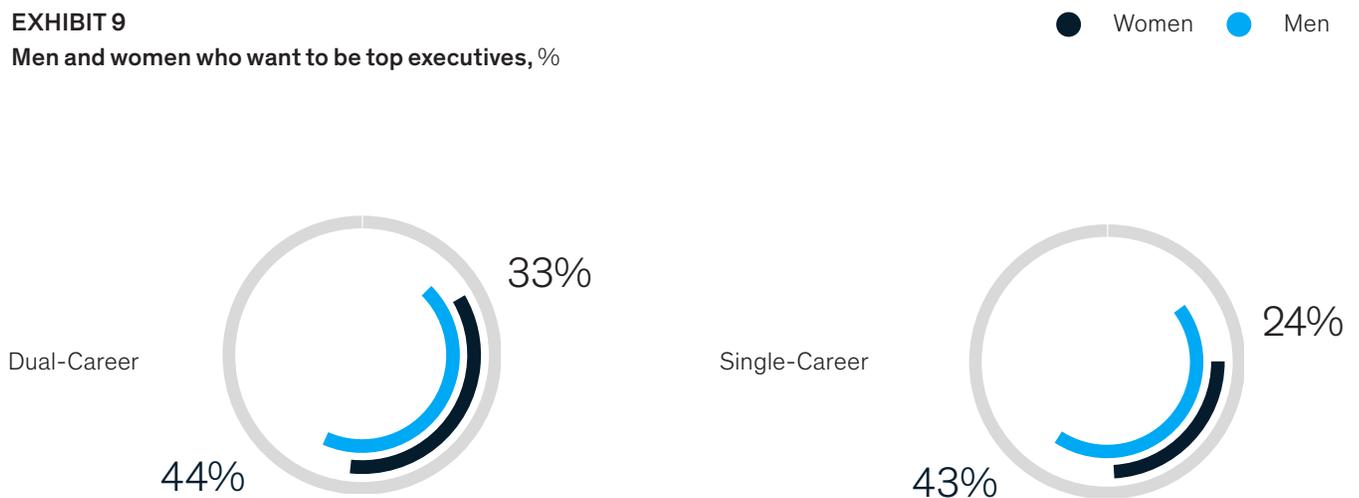
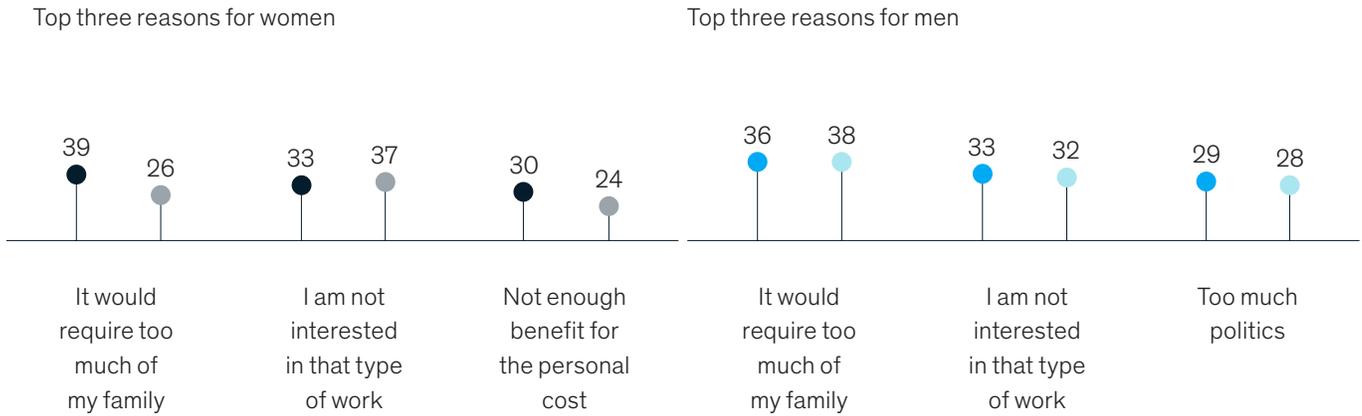


EXHIBIT 10

Top reasons for not wanting to be a top executive, %

● Women DCC ● Women SCC ● Men DCC ● Men SCC



And while their ambition is still healthy, employees in DCCs tend to become more content in their positions as they age and are less eager for promotions. Across both men and women in DCCs, ambition to be promoted to the next level falls as they grow older (Exhibit 11). Similarly, DCCs' desire to be promoted to top executive wanes with age for both men and women (Exhibit 12).

EXHIBIT 11

Men and women in DCC who want to be promoted to the next level by age, %

● Women ● Men

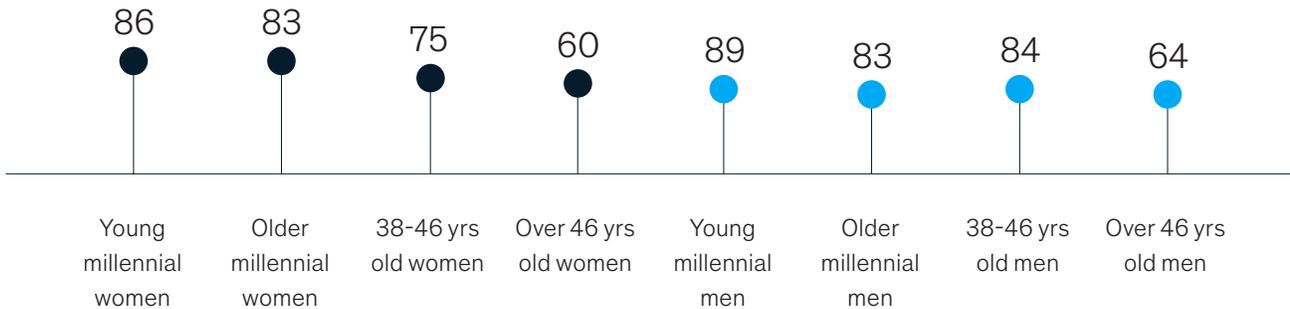
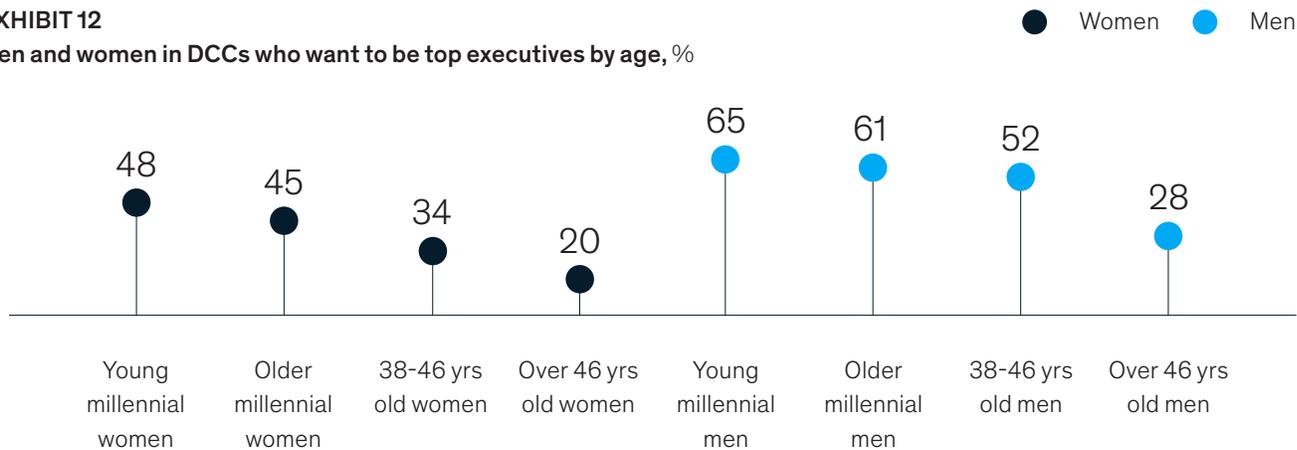


EXHIBIT 12

Men and women in DCCs who want to be top executives by age, %



In short, workers in DCCs tend to steadily progress through the ranks but may not aspire to the top because the top looks inflexible and daunting. If companies can openly offer flexible schedules—even to those at the highest ranks—and other top-level support for work-life balance, these workers might be more eager to reach their company’s top ranks.

Additionally, companies can do more to base promotions and top-executive hiring decisions on output rather than input to ensure equity for employees in DCCs. Too many companies mistake quantity—the number of hours an employee spends on the job—for quality, which is reflected in the employee’s output. The president of a global not-for-profit organization noted, “There’s a misunderstanding, a perception that women with children are less productive, but they are extremely effective because they have to be. Employers should consider that they get the job done, and they will be loyal if you support them and trust them. I trust them to do what needs to be done. If they need to be offline from 4:30-7:30, that is fine. Don’t make assumptions about people. They might be able to get childcare to go to that conference, or to bring the nanny with them. The loyalty and the trust that you build is priceless.”

Employers also need to consider that some of these couples may be accelerating and decelerating their careers at times to allow their partners’ career to ramp up or down, and in doing so may trade immediate advancement for increased flexibility. The tech-firm executive, for example, made this trade: “It helps that our jobs are different and not both in [the same field], but there is also a tradeoff. I’m not in headquarters, and from a career standpoint that’s not ideal, but geographically, it’s totally ideal,” she said. It is helpful when companies can give these valuable employees a variety of flexible job options that allow them to succeed both at home and at work.



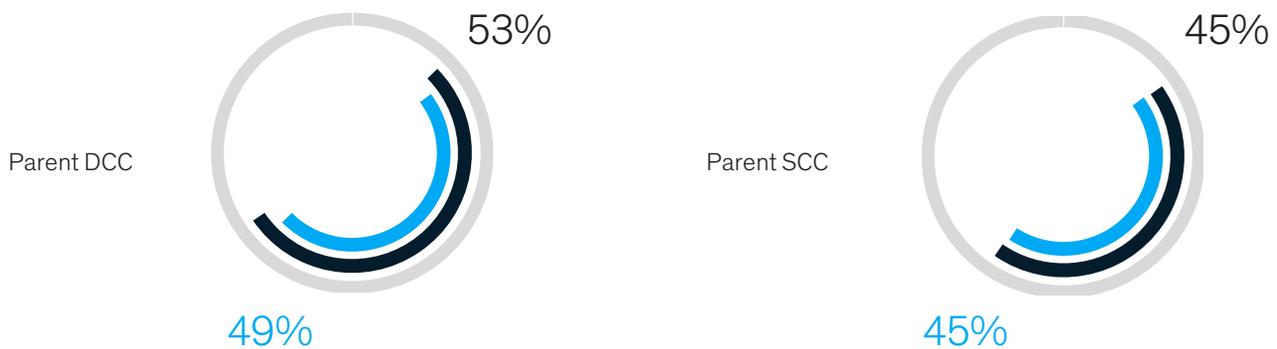
3. Create a culture that encourages work-life balance

In a positive sign for workers in DCCs in the modern workplace, employees in DCCs are more likely than their peers in SCCs to report that they have managers who help them balance work with personal demands. Parents in DCCs, in particular, receive such support; both male and female parents in DCCs are more likely than those in SCCs to say they have managers who help them maintain work-life balance (Exhibit 13).

It's worth noting, though, that fewer than half of workers—whether SCC or DCC—say that they have such support from their managers. Only in certain categories—female parents in DCCs and older millennial women, for example—does a scant majority report having managers who support work-life balance (Exhibit 14).

EXHIBIT 13
Parents in DCCs and SCCs reporting that managers help them balance work and life, %

● Women ● Men

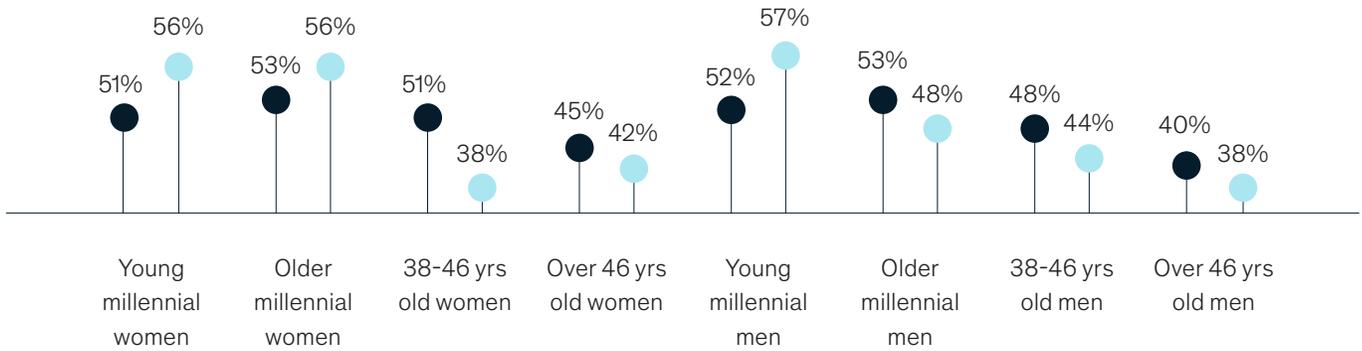


Leaders and managers should be coached to speak directly to employees about how they navigate their own challenges in balancing work-life responsibilities so that employees in DCCs will be encouraged to strive for top positions. They should also be open to offering flexible work schedules to employees in DCCs and to evaluating these workers' performance based on output, rather than the number of hours they put in.

EXHIBIT 14

Men and women with managers that help manage work-life balance by age, %

● DCC ● SCC



Among the executives we interviewed, support in the form of flexible work schedules has been especially helpful. When asked how her employer helped her in her career, one senior executive responded, “Flexible work, being able to work 80 percent [instead of full] time, were especially helpful—and manifested in taking additional weeks of vacation aligned with my children’s schedule. I also could choose my client base and did so to be more local, without sacrificing the quality of work that I did. In return for this, I became more flexible with the types of companies I worked with.”

McKinsey’s research has shown, however, that employees are often reluctant to ask for flexible schedules for fear of hindering their advancement. To “de-risk” flexible policies, then, companies should encourage leaders to signal their acceptance and usage of flexible working policies, and they should foster open dialogues about how policies could be improved to better accommodate employees’ and their families’ needs.

“Flexible work schedules have been especially helpful.”

Other policies, services, and amenities that companies can offer to encourage work-life balance include:

- Paid maternity and paternity leave that exceeds government requirements
- Emergency back-up child-care services
- On-site child care
- Subsidized child-care expenses
- Nursing rooms for breastfeeding mothers
- Concierge services

On-site daycare was an especially popular option among the executives we interviewed; several view it as a hugely desirable company asset that promotes work-life balance. These are just a few of the potential benefits employers can provide to their employees in DCC.

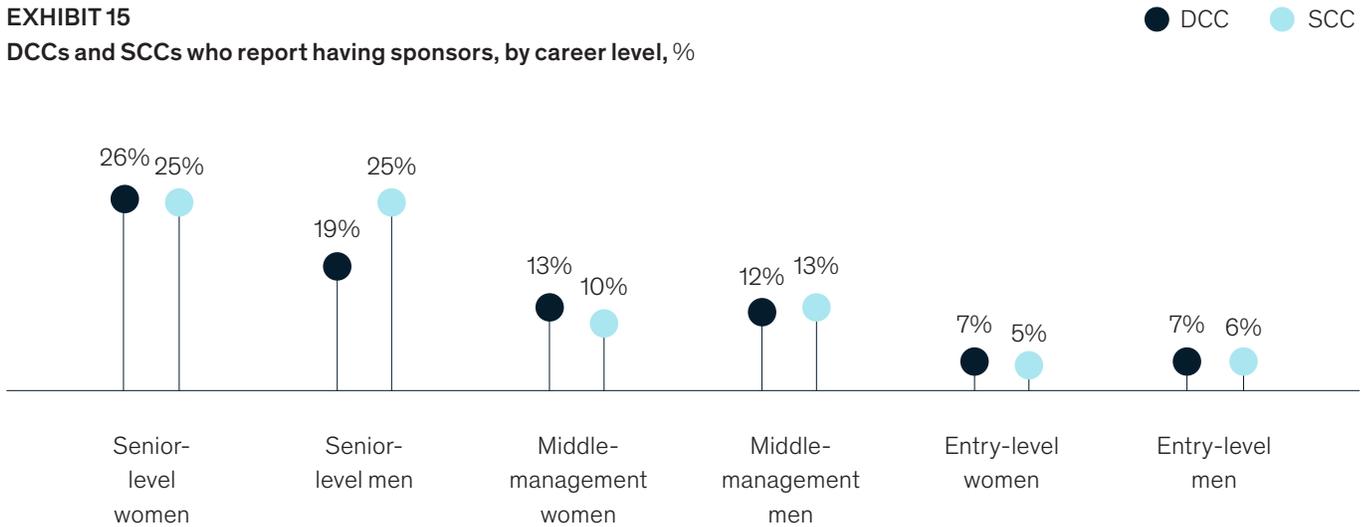


4. Ensure consistent access to sustainable sponsorship

Having a sponsor who is an advocate and mentor can play a major role in career success. But for men and women in DCCs—and workers in general—access to sponsorship is hard to come by, as most employees do not have sponsors. Of all workers at all career levels, senior-level women in DCCs are most likely to have sponsors, but even in this group, only about a quarter has one or more sponsors (Exhibit 15).

EXHIBIT 15

DCCs and SCCs who report having sponsors, by career level, %



These findings point to a need for sponsorship opportunities to be made available more widely, at all levels of employment. It would be particularly helpful if lower-level employees had senior-level sponsors in DCCs who could demonstrate how to succeed while juggling home and work responsibilities. Sponsorships also need to be sustainable. For both DCCs and SCCs, sponsorship rates decrease with age (Exhibit 16).

This decline is especially unfortunate for women, because McKinsey’s Women in the Workplace research has found that women often cite sponsorship as a key contributor to their success. Alisa Lessing, Managing Director and Global Head of Marketing and Distribution Compliance at BlackRock, credits much of her early career success to having an informal “mentor and coach” who was both a mother and a high-profile executive. “She had older children and lived close by. I could watch her and ask her questions. I saw how she supported herself and her family, and I mirrored that.” The managing director later repaid the favor by mentoring numerous younger women herself as she rose through the ranks. “People would reach out and say, ‘So-and-so said I should have coffee with you.’ I developed a following. People [seeking mentors] somehow find you,” she said.



Supporting and sustaining the dual- career choice

Employment policies and a company culture that support dual-career couples help not only employees, but also employers. Flexible schedules, support for work-life balance, access to mentorship, and other pro-DCC measures end up benefitting both the bottom line and the company culture. Flexible schedules are particularly advantageous, as they encourage teamwork, allow employers to draw from a wider talent pool, and help to ensure business continuity. Employees tend to be more loyal when they have a flexible schedule, too, resulting in lower turnover and hiring costs.

Maintaining a workplace that supports dual-career couples helps to ensure and promote continued diversity in the workplace. It is also a business imperative; to recruit and retain the best talent, businesses need to make their workplace a welcoming one for DCCs. And as our research for Women in the Workplace has shown, having diversity among employees and leaders generates above-average financial returns for companies of all sizes and sectors.

Ultimately, employees are more satisfied when their employers demonstrate a clear commitment to supporting dual-career couples and their families. And as every employer knows, a satisfied workforce is an invaluable asset to any business.

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