Dual Career challenges have changed the face of hiring. Not only for academic couples, but for other professional hiring employers across industry sectors, this dilemma has often been the sticking point in many a foilled recruitment and certainly a grave risk to retention. Notably, what was once termed the ‘trailing spouse’ phenomenon, now is fast becoming one of the most challenging issues in the advancement of women professionals.

Twenty years ago, the ‘spouse’ was almost always a woman. She wasn’t in the professions and ‘she’ handled the logistics of any professional move her husband made. Today that dynamic has shifted dramatically. With more and more women, not only in the workplace, but professionally advancing toward what was once seen as a ‘glass ceiling’, husbands and now ‘recognized’ partners are conflicted at having to consider the natural flow of their own career trajectory when their partner is offered an opportunity which would require them to relocate. Living in a global economy has done wonders for ‘progress’, but with it came a whole host of issues to address in its wake.

When it comes to retention, some turnover is demographically specific, particularly for women who are balancing serious professional careers and family duties at the same time. They may choose to leave a company/institution instead of sacrificing their other interests and responsibilities in order to make the job work. Others elect to quit their jobs when they decide to have children, rather than simply taking a maternity leave. And even more disturbing, a woman’s perception of their career path might also be tainted by their awareness of the glass ceiling, which may, in turn, lower their level of commitment to any particular employer, since many believe they’re not in contention for top-level jobs. These factors, along with spousal employment and the inability for families to assimilate in a new community translate into higher turnover rates for women in many companies and institutions.

In a 2012, the Association of Women in Science (AWIS) issued a study exploring outdated work environments and unfriendly family policies. Some light was shed on the fallout of professional relocation. Attracting workers into science and technology fields could be hampered by work-life integration issues according to this international survey. Drawing data from 4,225 publishing scientists and researchers worldwide, AWIS found one in 10 researchers indicated that they expect to leave their current job within the next year. Of those intending to leave, females were twice as likely (12%) as males (6%) to cite a spouse’s job offer or relocation as the reason for their early leave. Of researchers intending to leave, 9 percent indicated it was because they were unable to balance work-life integration.
Tucked away in the Capital Region of upstate New York is an organization that may bring some real promise to some of these ongoing challenges. Enter Tech Valley Connect—a unique nonprofit originally piloted at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in July 2009, to focus on both employer recruitment efforts and improving retention by assisting newly relocating candidates and families integrate into the surrounding area. Their unique services include targeted year-long dual career support, family integration and cultural transitioning.

The program founders looked at reasons for declined offers and early leave and found spousal employment and the inability for families to connect to their new surroundings to be consistently the issues which floated to the top. The direct and indirect cost of involuntary turnover of professional hires for employers is astronomical, conservatively between 2 and 4 times the salary of the original hire depending on the factors involved with the recruitment. And certainly because of this, the conversation about hiring in isolation has shifted to a much more holistic approach taking on matters such as spousal employment into account in terms of the way they fashion benefit packages and offers.

Tech Valley Connect is a distinctive business model focused on helping regional employers with recruitment and retention of valued employees. Originating from a National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant and Elsevier Foundation funded pilot program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Tech Valley Connect is well positioned to break the significant isolation often associated with moving to a new area by working with families and getting them actively engaged in their new community. In addition to dual career support, activities and introductions are strategically planned to connect the newcomer, getting them involved to the point where their new community starts to feel like ‘home’.

The Tech Valley Connect program works when members (employers) of the consortium refer a new hire (and their family) to Client Coordinators who will work with them for one year to assist with integration into the surrounding community by providing qualified resources and strategic social and professional networking opportunities. Connecting families to resources specific to their needs is a key element in getting hires settled and linked to their new communities.

Monthly social events are scheduled to engage newcomers and introduce them to others from the region and those who have also relocated.

The plight of the dual career couple is far reaching. The spouse/partner employment support service employed by Tech Valley Connect works by having coordinators set up informational networking interviews with decision makers in the spouse/partner’s discipline from within the consortium. The informational interviews are NOT job interviews – but more, an opportunity to have access to management and begin the process of building a substantive professional network. Face to face meetings can have a more powerful impact than emailing CVs and searching job boards. The conversation is more specific and the dynamic of the meeting changes because the discussion is not a formal “job interview.” Spouse/partners are meeting professionals who may have inside knowledge in terms of upcoming retirements, other colleagues looking for quality candidates within the discipline who they can make introductions too - broadening the web of professional contacts. As newcomers, they are gaining access to leaders in their respective fields that they likely just wouldn’t have had access to otherwise for years.

Foreign nationals face even harder challenges when relocating. Tech Valley Connect offers resources for foreign nationals to help with adjustments necessary to integrate into U.S. culture, customs and traditions. Being able to offer understanding and information to learn about U.S. culture can give families the tools they need to transition successfully.

The Tech Valley Connect model has been tested in an economic environment that includes various industry sectors: academia, healthcare, technology, manufacturing, corporate, finance, etc. and found highly effective. Tech Valley Connect’s clients are staying. After 4½ years of implementing this unique infrastructure, working with over 150 new hires (38% women hires), 95% of those new original hires have remained in their positions.

Spouse/partners have found jobs 39% faster than the national average. As a recruitment tool, the tangible resources offered by Tech Valley Connect can tip the scale when attracting talent.
A local university was aggressively working to recruit a top staff position but the candidate was hesitant, fearing the opportunities for his spouse's career would be limited - she was PhD, a dance therapist. They referred the family to Tech Valley Connect who set up a weekend visit for the couple. Informational interviews were coordinated with area professionals involved with healthcare, mental health, social work, education, dance, yoga and the arts. By Thursday of that week, the candidate accepted the position - not because his wife had found a job - but because there was a structured program in place that would actively build personal and professional networks for her that just didn't exist anywhere else. One of the informational interviews turned to gold - through the informational interview process, this spouse did find a job and currently works for the Center for Disability Services keeping her career trajectory on track.

By making both professional and personal connections for these newcomers, employers are able to recruit high-caliber candidates and ensure a higher rate of retention. As the region becomes more attractive for incoming business and the top talent they will employ, the overall regional economy improves which enhances the area's ability to define itself as a sought-after employment destination. More specifically for women professionals, by instituting this type of support system they are given more leverage when making decisions to advance their careers.

Score one for the girls! ■

Angela McNerney serves as the President & CEO of Tech Valley Connect. She developed the independent, not-for-profit Tech Valley Connect program from its inception as a pilot program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. At Rensselaer she served as program director for an NSF ADVANCE and an Elsevier Foundation grant to pilot an innovative program focused on improving retention and facilitating career advancement of women faculty.

**Tips for Dual Career Couples ...**

**Manage expectations.** Know that it takes an average of 11.9 months for a professional to land a job. It is a full-time job to look for a full-time job. Put your time in.

**Networking.** Create job opportunities for spouse/partners by professionally networking in the new destination. Go to events.

**Join professional associations.**

**Volunteering** is a great way to network at an organization you may want to work at and it gives an opportunity to try the employer out before buying in. It also gives them a chance to try you out! Make sure the money works before either of you accepts an offer. Financial stress can be a quick and easy way to fail at this decision. Do your homework.

- Living expenses: Will you be living in separate cities until spouse finds job?
- Will you be paying a mortgage in one city and trying to pay for housing costs in another?
- Cost of living – be cognizant of differences in costs from where you are living to where you will be living.

**Taking turns when making career decisions** will ultimately create the best result for professional couples. Accommodations need to come from both or the outcome will never be ideal.

**Share duties at home equally.** The days of 'mom' taking care of the household are long behind us. Schedule time together. Really demanding careers can take us away from what is really important. Don't let it.

More and more, employers are working to create support systems to accommodate dual career couples. So ask if one exists.

**Be patient.** The tide is turning for career couples so put a plan together and talk together often weighing pros and cons, if there is a move in your future.