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how female expatriates mobilise dual-career strategies**  
**Shortland, S.**

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# **Career cooperation, coordination, compatibility and co-working: how female expatriates mobilise dual-career strategies**

## **Abstract**

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this case study is to examine how female expatriates mobilise couples' dual-career coordination strategic choices to achieve their own and their partners' desired career goals.

### ***Design/methodology/approach***

This qualitative research is based upon in-depth interviews with 20 dual-career female expatriates working in two case study oil and gas organisations.

### ***Findings***

Female expatriates use a series of tactics ranging from cooperation in maintaining a dual-career hierarchy, through to coordinating aspects of their own and their partners' assignments, undertaking compatible industry roles, and co-working (working together in the same organisation) to attempt to achieve a greater egalitarian international dual-career strategic outcome.

### ***Research limitations/implications***

This case analysis was based on a relatively small sample of female expatriates in heterosexual relationships working in oil and gas exploration. Further research in different sectors, with larger samples, and with male expatriates is also needed.

### ***Practical implications***

Employers should minimise periods of separation by focusing on coordinated assignment timings for both partners, facilitate suitable employment for both partners who wish to work abroad, and prioritise securing partner work visas.

### *Social implications*

The inability to pursue desired dual-careers together while undertaking international assignments can be detrimental to couples' relationships, potentially leading to unwillingness to expatriate and thereby deliver necessary skills in the host country.

### *Originality*

Originality lies in identifying the tactics women use to enact dual-career coordination strategies, including coordinating assignment timings and locations to reduce separation, and pursuing compatible roles to achieve egalitarian career and relationship outcomes. While women expected co-working in the same firm to facilitate dual-career mobility, its career outcomes were disappointing.

**Article classification:** Case study.

**Key words:** breadwinners; co-working; dual-careers; expatriation; gender diversity; women.

## **Introduction**

Undertaking expatriation enables individuals to gain career capital (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018) contributing to development of high potential (Collings and Isichei, 2018). Expatriate assignments also provide considerable benefits to employers who use them to fill skills gaps, transfer and share corporate knowledge and culture, and develop their future leaders (Baruch, *et al.*, 2016). Increasing expatriate diversity is an organisational target aligned with improving business performance outcomes (Shortland and Perkins, 2016). Yet practitioner surveys highlight that male expatriates hold the majority of career-enhancing expatriate roles (Santa Fe Relocation, 2018), reflecting men's main breadwinner status (Cole, 2012). This suggests that women are less likely to benefit from the career outcomes that can flow from expatriate assignments. Roos (2013) notes that mobility decisions are discussed and negotiated within the family. However, problems arise particularly when men follow their working female partners and have to adjust to being secondary breadwinners (or not working at all) as this can lead to a negative sense of identity (Cole, 2012). As such, dual-career choices are recognised as gendered (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015).

Couples, committed to supporting each other's careers, plan career coordination strategies to enable each partner's individual circumstances and organisational situations to be recognised (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015). However, such preferred strategic career coordination choices must be mobilised if dual-career objectives are to be achieved. This paper aims to reveal the actions that current female expatriates working in the oil and gas industry take to enact dual-career coordination strategies. To achieve this aim, the research study's objectives are to identify the dual-career support offered by organisations which women expatriates believe to be most valuable in supporting their expatriation as part of a dual-career couple and the steps women take when deciding to expatriate to facilitate their partners' employment

through hearing women expatriates' voices. To fulfil these objectives, the following research questions are addressed:

1. Which aspects of organisational dual-career support do women value the most in facilitating the enactment of the couple's chosen dual-career coordination strategy?
2. Within a strategy of dual-career coordination, what tactics do female dual-career expatriates employ to facilitate positive career outcomes for themselves and their partners?

The oil and gas industry is considered as a particularly relevant industry in which to conduct this research as it is committed to increasing expatriate gender diversity and actively supports the facilitation of dual-career couples being able to work (Permits Foundation, 2019).

## **Literature Review**

### ***The international dual-career context***

Harvey *et al.* (2009) provide a helpful distinction between dual-career and dual-income couples, while also highlighting the overlapping importance of career and financial issues for expatriating partners. The authors note that dual-career couples are continually professionally employed in roles to which they are psychologically committed, or are in upwardly mobile jobs providing personal growth; dual-income couples work for the money or at least one partner is driven to enhance family income. They thus suggest that professional dual-career couples assess the advantage of the expatriate offer for one member against the disadvantages for the couple as a unit. Hence, the loss of one income cannot be overlooked as this will affect family financial well-being and can lead to assignment refusal. Indeed, Dupuis *et al.* (2008) find that the challenges of dual-career relationships appear no greater than relationships where two incomes are earned: regular jobs may involve job security and

accumulated benefits arising from gaining seniority; whereas people in careers potentially enjoy more opportunities for external mobility. Thus, although financial issues are often thought to undermine the importance of the partner's career, decisions to expatriate rest on combinations of favourable career development, career stage and family characteristics/outcomes. Partner willingness to relocate internationally also exerts a positive influence on employee willingness to go (Konopaske *et al.*, 2005). Partners report lower self-esteem and self-worth affecting the couple's relationship (McNulty, 2012). They can feel less valued, competent, and isolated through loss of contacts. Hence, employees can report being stressed by relationship strains, including coping with their partner's disappointment (Brown, 2008).

Women in dual-career couples experience more work/personal life conflict than men (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2017) and child-rearing negatively affects women's but not men's earning potential (Duxbury *et al.*, 2007). Women combine careers with household work, holding responsibility for the majority of home/childcare duties (Hutchings *et al.*, 2012), but while they can outsource the housework, they retain their priority over children's education (Tzeng, 2006). Career-focused mothers thus "concurrently embrace the roles of professional, partner and parent" (Ahmed and Carrim, 2016, p. 11). The issue of career precedence in dual-career international mobility is gendered, affecting women more negatively (Tzanakou, 2017). As men hold structural and cultural advantage (men are linked to work, women with the family), this can result in women changing their work ambitions to "disproportionately shoulder the burden of geographic relocation" (Wong, 2017, p. 192).

Riusala and Suutari (2000) state that one of the top concerns for dual-career couples is the partner gaining employment in the host country, and after repatriation. Active self-management of the expatriation process can assist with successful outcomes in this regard (Kierner and Suutari, 2017). Partner career counselling is valued highly by expatriates but

few organisations offer this. Konopaske *et al.* (2005, p. 420) note that partners also value career assistance in the host country but are “frustrated” by lack of such organisational support. McNulty (2012) reports that partners rank social and practical support highly with access to technology, housing support, on-going practical support, time to adjust, and funded home-country visits considered most valuable. Subsidising decreased family income and education assistance for the trailing partner are the top-ranked forms of professional support. While almost 80% of the partners in her study had a career before relocating, only just over one-third were able to continue in this mainly due to visa/work permit restrictions. This caused resentment, loss of identity and self-esteem. Not surprisingly, partners found the support given to be disappointing.

Moore (2002) recommends flexibility on assignment timing arguing that regular assessments of mobility potential are necessary, with ample lead time given before the relocation takes place, and with alternatives to relocation offered. Indeed, in Kirk’s (2016) study, dual-career expatriates report negotiating flexible alternatives to traditional accompanied expatriation including commuting, business travel, and short assignments, or leaving their partner behind and going unaccompanied. However, Konopaske *et al.* (2005) report that partners are generally less willing to relocate internationally and jeopardise their careers for short periods (less than a year); longer assignments enable relationship closeness, and understanding of the country. Indeed, Shortland (2018) notes that although dual-career barriers can be addressed through more flexible short-term and commuter assignments, women find these disruptive to home life and can be unwilling to undertake them.

It is notable that corporate career support appears focused to a greater extent on female trailing partners than on males (Selmer and Leung, 2003). This potentially reflects both the numbers involved (female partners predominate) and stereotypical assumptions over the lead career/breadwinner status. It also suggests organisational maintenance of the status

quo rather than encouragement of career-oriented women expatriates. But, as the number of expatriate status-reversal marriages increases (McNulty, 2014), supporting male partners has gained greater employer attention within the practitioner literature (Permits Foundation, 2009).

### ***Family typologies, partner roles and career coordination strategies***

Duxbury *et al.* (2007) suggest a four-fold typology addressing dual-careers and dual-incomes: dual-career couples (both partners are engaged in managerial or professional work); dual-earner couples (both partners have income earning jobs rather than careers); status-reversal couples (the female partner is in managerial or professional work, the male partner has a job); and new-traditional couples (the male partner is in managerial or professional work, the female partner has a job). The authors highlight an increased preference for equitable and gender-interchangeable role allocation (an egalitarian career form).

Turning to the role of the expatriate partner, a six-fold typology is proposed by Mäkelä *et al.* (2011) as follows: 1) the supporting partner who provides emotional and practical support, for example by taking responsibility for children; 2) the flexible partner who takes a break from following his/her career while abroad and undertakes professional development and self-fulfilling activities; 3) the instrumental partner who is the careerist and uses their partner to benefit their career; 4) the restricting partner who restricts in some way the expatriate's opportunity to make choices concerning their work and career; 5) the determining partner who gets the job abroad while the other seeks opportunities to work abroad as well; and 6) equal partners who advance their careers equally, sometimes living separately and travelling between locations.

During their career life cycles individuals may undertake different partner roles appropriate to their circumstances but these may not correspond well with organisational international mobility requirements (Kirk, 2016). To follow a coordinated career approach,



Känsälä *et al.* (2015) propose that couples adopt hierarchical, egalitarian or loose dual-career strategies, noting these strategies can change over the family life cycle. The hierarchical strategy recognises that dual-career couples prioritise one career over the other, and over the couple's relationship. This decision may be based on pragmatic considerations such as the higher income of the organisationally-relocated partner, upon level of career investment, or to follow traditional gender roles. The secondary career holder leaves or scales down work and supports the working partner. To adapt to the situation of following on behind a hierarchically-prioritised career, the partner might invest emotionally in increased family responsibilities or further education. The hierarchical career coordination strategy is typically followed by male expatriates because, as Känsälä *et al.* (2015) note, women prioritise family over work to a greater extent than men. Hence, the male career holds precedence over that of the female in the hierarchical strategy.

In the egalitarian strategy, both careers and the relationship are equally important and so couples aim "to be together in the same place and for both to pursue interesting careers" (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015, p. 2200). Both partners mutually support each other's careers and family responsibilities, although balancing the career demands of both partners restricts the other to some extent. The authors report that the overall experience of undertaking this career coordination strategy is more positive than the hierarchical strategy and that this approach is followed mainly by female expatriates.

In the loose career coordination strategy, there is equal investment in both careers which are prioritised over family life. Each career is tacitly supported but is independent of the other, family life is scaled down, and long distance relationships may be required. This career coordination strategy is also more common among female expatriates. Career locations affect how family responsibilities are shared, although these "tend to fall more on the woman" (Känsälä *et al.* 2015, p. 2194).

While the literature proposes career coordination strategies and highlights partner roles in an expatriate context, there appears to be a ‘research gap’ (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011) in our knowledge that shows how these strategies are mobilised in practice, particularly in respect of the actions that women assignees employ to ensure dual-career ambitions are addressed. Hence, this research examines the tactics that partnered female assignees take to enact a coordinated dual-career strategy and the organisational support given to help them achieve this. It is set within the framework of hierarchical, egalitarian and loose career coordination strategies as proposed by Käsälä *et al.* (2015).

## **Method**

An agenda item at one of the regular meetings of the UK Oil and Gas Industry Peer Group concerned the issue of increasing expatriate gender diversity. During the discussion by the 18 global company representatives, the problem of dual-careers presenting a potential barrier to the movement of women assignees was raised by the attendees and discussed at length. Two of these 18 peer group members decided to take this forward by supporting a research study into the dual-career barriers faced by their female expatriates. Both were International Assignments Managers in medium-sized exploration and production firms who held responsibility for expatriation and shared a common goal of improving their representation of female assignees. This case study therefore relates to the stated concerns and interventions reported within the oil and gas industry as experienced by two global firms with UK bases of operation. A qualitative case study research approach was selected to enable the exploration of “the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

The two International Assignments Managers did not have reliable data on which of their 93 female assignees were in dual-career partnerships, so they contacted all of them (66, representing 11% of the expatriate population in Firm 1; and 27, representing 8% of the

expatriate population in Firm 2) asking them to participate in this research if they were part of a dual-career couple, by answering questions via e-mail and follow-up interviews. Dual-career couples were explained as referring to each partner being highly qualified and pursuing individual career goals (Relocate Global, 2017). Forty-five partnered women, all of whom were in heterosexual relationships, who were currently on international assignments within these two organisations agreed to participate anonymously (34 in Firm 1; 11 in Firm 2) via e-mail correspondence. The expatriate correspondence questions sought to establish context as to whether potential work opportunities for partners in the host location acted as a disincentive or deterrent to women accepting an expatriate assignment. They also sought to find out the type of support provided by the women expatriates' employers to enable pursuit of dual-career opportunities abroad.

Both firms required that all interviews be conducted in working time on company premises to meet strict health and safety requirements in the oil and gas industry and satisfy necessary insurance provisions; dual-career partners were not permitted on company worksites and so permission to approach them was denied. Research access was not given to the several hundred male expatriates employed by the two firms due to time and resource constraints, thereby also precluding interviewing any co-working male partners (that is, male expatriates working in the same organisation as their female partners). Interviewing was therefore restricted to the female expatriates.

Thirty-seven women were willing to be interviewed in-depth (32 in Firm 1; 5 in Firm 2). Given the limited access period available, stratified sampling (Collis and Hussey, 2009) took account of factors such as seniority/grade, home/host locations, assignment types undertaken, previous assignments undertaken, accompanied or solo assignment status, and having children. The profile of the sample reflected the demographics of the total population as far as possible, subject to interview scheduling availability. Twenty partnered women were

selected for interview (16 in Firm 1; 4 in Firm 2). Sixteen interviewees were on long-term assignments (averaging three years); three were on rotational assignments whereby they spent 28 days on-shift in the host country and 28 days back at home; and one was undertaking a six-month short-term assignment. Nine women were in junior management grades, and nine in middle management. One woman was a senior manager and another, a graduate trainee. This grading was representative of the 45 partnered women. Eight of the women assignees had children, all of whom accompanied them on assignment, with the majority aged two or under.

The semi-structured interview questions provided the basis to understand the nature of their male partners' work situations in order to gain a more complete profile of their assignment circumstances and for the female expatriates to speak about how they balanced their careers with those of their partners. They were also asked to detail actions they had taken, and the effectiveness of any employer support given, to maintain two careers (Appendix 1). Six men were co-working; of these, three men held the lead expatriate role, one held an equal role, and two held roles junior to their female partners in the host location. Seven of the male partners were working in the home country for other employers/self-employed, and one was on a rotational assignment with another oil company. Three of the male partners were working in the host country for other employers; three men were not working in the host location and were looking after young children. The profiles of the 20 female expatriates interviewed are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 near here

The female expatriates were interviewed confidentially, in a private setting on company premises by telephone or in person if the interviewee was present in the UK office

(for instance, if home on leave). All interviews followed the same semi-structured interview schedule, and all interviewees agreed to be recorded and their interviews transcribed. It was agreed that individuals would not be identified but be allocated a participant number (between 1 and 93) for research purposes; regional home/host location descriptors were used because the number of women expatriates in each country was so low that stating their host country could identify them. The expatriate interviews averaged around 60 minutes.

Drawing upon the e-mail correspondence and the interview data, a thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, the correspondence and interview transcripts were read and colour-coded thematically to identify main issues as detailed in the research questions and the sub-issues contained within the semi-structured interview questions. Emerging themes were also identified. In recognition of the potential coding drift that can befall a sole researcher, the thematic coding was then carried out afresh using NVivo. Coding trees were created using this qualitative analysis software. This process was executed after a period of a couple of months had elapsed so that the second coding exercise was separated from the first. This aimed to reduce potential memory bias towards repeating previous coding decisions rather than identifying them anew. The results of the two coding exercises were compared and cross-checked to ensure comparability. Where there were some discrepancies between the colour codes and the NVivo coding trees, the sections of text were revisited, reviewed and final coding determined. It was then possible to collapse some of the codes to group main themes together.

The two main a priori themes were organisational support and career coordination tactics (aligned to the two research questions). The main sub-themes identified relating to the interview questions/responses were: work visas; career precedence; and compatible dual-career roles. The main emerging themes from the interview responses related to: assignment timing; and co-working. For each of these themes qualitative data were extracted and

produced as print outs. Frequency counts were recorded of the number of sources commenting on an issue and the number of references that they made to it. In this way it was ensured that the themes identified were key to the participants and that data cited were representative of the group of women interviewed, not sole opinions.

## **Findings**

The findings are presented within two main sections – organisational support and career co-ordination tactics aligned to the research questions. The thematic data are categorised and presented under sub-headings within each of these sections reflecting the key sub-themes and emerging themes (assignment timing; work visas; career precedence; compatible roles; and co-working).

### ***Organisational support***

#### *Assignment timing*

The main area of organisational support for dual-careers which the women assignees saw as valuable concerned coordination of the timing of both partners' moves to reduce periods of marital separation. Currently, this issue was not addressed effectively by their employers. The majority of women were unhappy that they would have to accept periods of separation while dual-career partners' own organisations sought appropriate positions in their host locations and secured necessary visas. When the couple were co-working in the same organisation, poor organisational coordination of assignment timings created disgruntlement, even bitterness, amongst the female assignees. They expressed extreme dissatisfaction with inefficiencies in internal appointments and deployment processes if they believed that these created unnecessary separation:

“I personally feel a bit bitter about it. There was no reason for two people to be separated, because one asset (company operation) and the other asset can't agree. And there was adequate notice ... (but) we were split apart. Five weeks, but it should have

been zero weeks, which is my point. It was unnecessary, and it is something that bothers me obviously to this day because I don't think the (North African) asset should have been able to a) not get off their butt to make sure that replacements were in place in adequate time and b) and if they hadn't, then they should have had to put up with the pain of not having someone in place. They made it our problem.” (#14)

However, when their partners worked for different firms, the women viewed these periods of separation as the price to pay for both partners being able to pursue their own careers:

“One of the things I would say about (my husband's) and my moves is we haven't moved at the same time. The move between (Western Europe and North America) was three and a half months apart and (North America to East Asia) was three months. So we have always accepted that, and when we moved (within Western Europe), that was six months, I commuted back every week for six months. We have always seen that as being the pay off, if you like, for the flexibility of being able to retain control over both careers.” (#60)

#### *Work visas*

The provision of necessary visas and permits to enable their partners to work in the host location was also considered a valuable organisational intervention to maintaining dual-careers. Again, organisational support for this aspect was considered inadequate and the inability of their partners to obtain work authorisation also created considerable resentment amongst the women expatriates. The women assignees spoke of their anger because “the company doesn't provide any support in helping somebody” (#46). They also spoke of making threats of refusing the position if their partners could not work or insisting that their firm took their partners on contract before they would accept their own assignments:

“We are eight years together, we are engaged and we wanted to get married this year, which was all in the plan. I’m committed to the job and he’s working in the same industry. So for me it (partner unable to work) would have been a reason of not accepting the job and not coming.” (#17)

“They had to accept that the guy who had been doing it for two years was going to be changed over for (my husband) ... then eventually his company couldn’t supply visas, and so (Firm 1) organised taking on (my husband) as a contractor through their own visa process, so he ended up leaving his company ... and (Firm 1) had to facilitate that and had to bring him on a corporate visa.” (#5)

While the female expatriates said that partner contract employment within their own firms was helpful in supporting dual-careers, they indicated that offers of co-working could cause resentment amongst the local workforce:

“When (my husband) came out to (North Africa), he was looking for work ... we didn’t ask the company to give him a job and he was doing the circuit and meeting all sorts of people and (Firm 1) did hire him as a consultant and some eyebrows were raised, like, ‘how come he got the job? My wife could have done something in the accounting group, but they wouldn’t even consider it’.” (#14)

### ***Career coordination tactics***

#### *Career precedence*

A key theme concerned how career precedence was determined and managed within the dual-career partnerships. For example, one tactic used was agreeing to take it in turns to not work in order to support each partner’s expatriate opportunities:

“So we had to discuss way in advance ... what would he do and he was ‘when we left, my career was way in the ascendancy and I have done pretty well ... So if your career needs to take off now, I am more than happy to potter around’. And now he is



willing to take a back seat, because I need to do that for my own growth or satisfaction.” (#44)

“We have just had to manage it from the start. At one point I resigned and arranged a job where he was living and, at that point, you could say his was the lead career and then we managed it more finding jobs in the same place. It happens that at this particular time he has taken a break ... we try and balance it.” (#56)

Although the female assignees reported that career precedence decisions had been discussed thoroughly with their partners, convincing their firms of this required considerable effort. They spoke of their struggles to change their firms’ perceptions that women were typically seen as ‘trailing spouses’. They highlighted the impact of such assumptions on selection for their expatriate positions as well as their experiences in attempting to justify the couple’s decision that the woman would hold the lead expatriate career:

“I was asked questions which I felt were not appropriate ... ‘how would my partner cope being a male overseas as a non-working partner?’ and ‘wouldn’t it be very difficult for me to do that?’ and I thought, ‘well why should it be any different for me than it would be for a man going overseas and taking his wife with him’. I know it is different, but it was implying that we hadn’t thought it through and that it might not work for whatever reason ... the role reversal that we have with my husband staying at home.” (#46)

Another dual-career tactic that the women assignees spoke about concerned each partner pursuing their own career, independent of the other. Prioritising their careers over living together, this usually necessitated the woman taking her assignment unaccompanied. Four women assignees made use of alternative assignment types such as rotational and short-term assignments to balance their careers with those of their non-mobile dual-career partners.

Three undertook rotational assignments, returning home for one month in every two to re-join their partners who maintained their careers in the home country:

“My husband and I started a wine business so I can’t leave (home country). So it is the only way for me to carry on. (We are) definitely not able to move.” (#59)

They also pointed out the benefits of undertaking rotation to reduce periods of marital separation and loneliness:

“He does contracting work so that when I am on shift he will work on small contracts. He works in IT, so when I am off shift, he is off as well ... and that is by our choice ... so if you extrapolate that over the course of the year ... you are spending six months of every year with your partner.” (#26)

“We knew that it was going to be a bit of a challenge for me personally. He deals with being away better than I do but because we knew it was going to be four weeks ... I could personally cope.” (#52)

One woman was on a six-month short-term assignment, and her partner remained in his job in the home country. She spoke of the difficulties of lengthy separation:

“I found it more difficult than I thought I would ... because you both change ... I don’t think that would work for two years in terms of us both being in separate locations.” (#3)

Three long-term female assignees undertook their assignments leaving their partners to continue their non-transferable careers in the home country. One was the mother of a teenager who lived with her at the assignment location. The other two undertook their assignments alone. Although this helped both partners further their careers, neither of these two women wished to continue these separate lives. They spoke of their loneliness and the difficulties spending long periods apart caused to their relationships. Looking ahead they

sought expatriate roles located in the same country as their partners or undertaking rotation to reduce periods of separation:

“He is in a different industry completely ... a very functional role ... and we did look at the opportunity for him to come down here and extend that, but it just wasn’t the right thing for him to be doing at this stage in his career, he really needed to be consolidating the experience that he has in the UK. (So) I am limited in my next role ... I don’t necessarily have that freedom of opportunity so I’m being more flexible about the type of role that I would do back in the UK.” (#10)

“(I’m) sitting there in the evenings and I have many weekends (when) I don’t speak to anyone else, unless I’m on the phone ... in terms of this job ... they want me to stay and I say ‘look it’s not compatible with my home life’ ... I come home and I am moaning that the house isn’t clean, and he’s moaning because I am moaning and we have a couple of days of that. And then it’s okay ... at least we know now, so it’s not divorce or anything. It’s just what happens. Looking ahead, there is a dream job ... that I want to do and it is in (Central Asia) and it’s on rotation because I love working (here). I feel like I have really learnt the culture, and I can really work with the people here ... and I’m back at home for 28 days.” (#50)

### *Compatible roles*

It was notable that some of the women assignees’ partners also worked in the oil and gas industry in competitor firms. This actually proved helpful in supporting the movement of both partners as firms in this sector were reported as keen to keep couples together as far as practicable. Women commented frequently on the compatibility of their partners’ jobs with their own careers and some women reported that they actively exploited this as a tactic to mobilise a coordinated dual-career strategy. For example, when different oil and gas firms operated in similar exploration locations, the women spoke of seeking expatriate roles in the

same or in neighbouring countries enabling weekend commuting, pressing their employers to see if such job opportunities were available:

“He used to work for (his oil firm) and (it) sent him to (East Asian country), and it’s kind of funny because the day he was told that he was actually to move, I had resigned from (my oil firm), and I had just resigned within five minutes! And that was the question that we had posed to each other. How am I going to get to (his location), do I stay with (my oil firm), and they would move me if I asked, or do I move forward with my decision to leave and hopefully my new company (Firm 2) has an office and a position for me (in husband’s location). And I went ahead and took the leap and moved to (Firm 2) and (they) at the time said we can’t get you (there) right away but would you take (nearby country) for a year and then we will move you.” (#63)

The female assignees also reported that they sought whether firms in related industries could offer potential opportunities to marry up compatible roles so that couples could expatriate together:

“He is in energy, but not oil and gas ... it would be a great option if opportunities were available and that was a route that he could take ... something that had lots of international operations that could align up.” (#3)

### *Co-working*

An emerging theme concerned women reporting adopting the tactic of applying for roles in an expatriate co-working capacity in order for both partners to work abroad concurrently in the same organisation. This proved particularly helpful to maintain family life when couples had children:

“I think that it is a reflection of our personal circumstances because we’ve got three children of school age. We really needed to have the stability.” (#2)

However while co-working women had been able to maintain their careers, accepting expatriate positions that enabled both partners to work together in the same firm did result in uncertainty. This was especially so if the roles undertaken were not in the key engineering, geologist or geophysicist disciplines typically fulfilled by international assignees:

“My husband is an accountant and I am an economist. The (expatriate) job options available for us are narrow, compared with the geosciences people. So it is difficult and we don’t know ... if we would both work at the next assignment.” (#24)

Undertaking co-working expatriate roles also resulted in career compromise and some disillusionment for the women assignees:

“For me it is entirely career-driven and it is for my partner as well. (But) it is not a career-enhancing move, it is sideways at best ... my level of responsibility is no greater or better than it was in my previous role, it is slightly lower ... I have gone backwards, but I have gone backwards because it was the only place we could both get jobs.” (#33)

“They did need somebody out here and I was available ... I don’t want to complain because it is an absolutely fantastic opportunity. I just think that had it been my assignment rather than (husband’s) assignment, it would have been better still, there would have been a bit more structure around my job and support for me. I sort of feel like, only occasionally ... I have been bunged over there because they want (him).” (#20)

Not all couples therefore wished to engage in co-working, despite its inherent attraction of providing expatriate employment for both partners in the same or nearby locations, as the following quote demonstrates:

“My husband works in the oil and gas industry also and each move we make is dictated by its suitability to both our careers. Some of our moves have been initiated

by (Firm 2), some by my husband's employer. We assess all offers of work and make a decision which best fits us both. One of the reasons why I will not go and work for (his firm) right now and I have been offered and (Firm 2) has offered jobs to (my husband) as well to make moves easier, and we have fought against it all the way. The reason being is, if we work for separate companies (Firm 2) has control over the decisions it makes around my career, it doesn't have any decision control around (his) career, and vice versa. So we, as a couple, retain the ultimate decision-making power. We can say 'yes that is right for us or no, it is not', and we know that any impact on the other person's career is a decision that we have made, not something that has gone on behind closed doors." (#60)

This suggests that co-working may reduce optimum career outcomes and the sense of career control for both partners.

## **Discussion**

Organisational support is known to be a key concern for relocating partners (McNulty, 2012) and partner employment is reported as being of particular significance to dual-career couples (Riusala and Suutari, 2000). Obtaining partner employment visas are also identified as a major employer concern in enabling international dual-career mobility (Permits Foundation, 2009) with the oil and gas sector being particularly active in lobbying governments for more favourable visa treatment of expatriate dual-career couples (Permits Foundation, 2019). It is therefore somewhat surprising that employer support for this particular issue was reported as being very limited by the female expatriates working for the two oil and gas firms in this research study. An emerging organisational support issue from this research concerned the limited employer attention being paid to the co-ordination of assignment timings for couples on the move. With little employer support for partner work visas and co-ordinated relocation

timings, couples' dual-career coordination strategies required active interventions on the part of the female assignees if they were to be mobilised to achieve their desired career goals.

The literature tells us that male and female partners make career decisions as a couple (Budworth *et al.*, 2008) with trade-offs and sacrifices practised to maintain mutual support (Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004). Thus, male partners cannot automatically be assumed to block their female partners' careers; alternatively they may support or add value to them (Ahmed and Carrim, 2016; Välimäki *et al.*, 2009). Being unable to realise dual-career expectations can lead to couples being unwilling to consider undertaking future assignments if appropriate employment for both partners is unobtainable (Kierner, 2018). Thus, the expatriate's partner is a stakeholder in mobility with their role and interaction with the company being discussed via the employee. Hence, partners can wield power in this relationship and "can get the firm to do something that it may not have otherwise done" (Lämsä *et al.*, 2017, p. 2921).

This case study applies Käsälä *et al.*'s (2015) dual-career coordination strategy framework to women expatriates in the oil and gas industry and adds to our knowledge by identifying dual-career mobilisation tactics used by female expatriates. As couples pursue a more career- and relationship- focused egalitarian strategy, the female expatriates took increasingly active steps to mobilise achieving this outcome. Cooperation with their organisations' efforts to secure dual-career roles for both partners was enhanced by direct female action to coordinate assignment locations and timings, and secure working visas. This leads to the following research proposition:

- By actively seeking out partner job opportunities and discussing/negotiating these with organisational representatives to generate career opportunities via compatible roles, female expatriates can achieve a more egalitarian outcome for both partners.

The literature reports on dual-career couples taking it in turns to hold the lead career (Hardill *et al.*, 1997) and/or coordinating roles and job locations so demonstrating efforts to achieve compatibility in career outcomes (Wong, 2017). Aligned with the literature, this research study also identified examples where dual-career couples alternated who led and who followed in the primary or secondary career role, as well as dual-career coordination through role/job location compatibility. An unexpected finding though concerned the emphasis on co-working as a means to attempt to achieve egalitarian international dual-career outcomes. Co-working occupations and careers typically involve the female partner in a junior support role (for example, diplomats and clergy) (Hakim, 2000). Notwithstanding this, greater career equivalency can also be in evidence: the partner's role can prove to be supportive of international mobility at similar career stages for example in the armed forces (Lakhani and Gade, 1992). Work-linked couples who share occupations and/or workplaces are reported to benefit from "diminished job or relationship tension as a result of the work-related support they can offer one another" (Ferguson *et al.*, 2016, p. 46).

Interestingly, in this female expatriate research, co-working in the same organisation as expatriates proved less successful in achieving an egalitarian dual-career coordination strategy than that of pursuing compatible roles via other employers. Indeed, co-working often led to a sense of disenchantment for the women expatriates. Either the female assignee or her partner ended up in less career-enhancing roles than they had hoped for as a result of limited opportunities being available for two people in one location at the same time. Female expatriates who previously participated in hierarchical dual-career coordination strategies (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015) gave up familiar roles at home for 'created' positions abroad. Women who had previously experienced career precedence found this turning towards a more hierarchical outcome on co-working expatriation. This leads to the following research proposition:



- The adoption of co-working as a dual career mobilisation tactic can result in an ‘expectation discrepancy’ between anticipated and actual egalitarian dual-career outcomes.

In this research, a small number of women followed a loose dual-career coordination strategy (Känsälä *et al.*, 2015) leaving their partners at home to pursue their own careers. It was notable though that all expatriate mothers (regardless of the dual-career co-ordination strategy adopted) lived with their children, potentially suggesting that while some women may be willing to adopt a loose, unaccompanied mobility strategy in respect of dual-careers, this is not the case in respect of having or attending to children. Living apart can be adopted as a means by which both partners can follow their desired careers rather than rejecting a first-choice job or breaking up. However, this may only be a “temporary fix”, as couples experience negative relationship outcomes which can lead to splitting up (McFall and Murray-Close, 2016, p. 61). In this study, the women expatriates reported that living apart was not their preferred choice as separation was detrimental to their relationships. It was notable that those who undertook unaccompanied assignments spoke of actively seeking to switch to rotation or, if their partner was involved in a potentially compatible line of work, exploring opportunities for their partners to work in the same industry. The female expatriates undertaking rotational assignments commented on how these enabled them to spend time with their partners while maintaining their own careers. When their partners worked on rotation, the women sought expatriate assignments in locations that enabled their partners to stay with them when off-shift. This leads to the following research proposition:

- Actions such as co-ordinating the use of complementary assignment types and aligning compatible industry roles can assist women to mobilise a more egalitarian dual-career strategy from a current loose approach.

***Implications for society and organisational practice***

Female assignees do not wish to jeopardise their relationships as a result of each partner pursuing their own career and so are less likely to be willing to contribute their skills to the host country in an expatriate capacity if this requires them to live apart from their dual-career partners. This suggests that to maximise diversity of talent, host country visa regimes should support dual-career couples. While prioritisation of employer support for partner work visas is known to be a facilitator of dual-career mobility as highlighted by lobbying bodies such as Permits Foundation, this research also identified that the complementary timing of their own and their partners' assignments was hugely important to female expatriates' satisfaction with their employing organisations. Besides supporting dual-career visa regime improvements via lobbying (see, for example, Permits Foundation, 2019), employers should therefore also prioritise keeping a couple together, minimising periods of separation, if they are to encourage women in dual-career relationships to take up expatriate roles.

Action to increase expatriate gender diversity requires employers actively to support both partners who want to follow their careers by working abroad to do so. This may take the form of facilitating the use of complementary assignments and co-working. However, in this research women expatriates found co-working to be less optimal than expected and thus organisations in all sectors offering this as a dual-career enabler will need to consider how best to provide roles to both partners that can support an egalitarian career- and relationship-focused approach.

### ***Limitations and further research***

This cross-sectional research was limited to a relatively small sample of female expatriates in two case study firms in the oil and gas industry. Further research is needed across a wider range of sectors, with larger samples and over time to examine in more depth the implications of different mobilisation tactics in achieving dual-career coordination strategies. Although efforts were taken to reduce any potential coding drift resulting from data analysis by a sole

researcher, further studies could benefit from additional researcher input into transcript coding. Further research to investigate mobilisation tactics used by male expatriates to achieve dual-career coordination strategies is also needed. Without interviewing the male partners of the female expatriates, their actions and opinions could not be ascertained in order to gain a balanced view of the dual-career tactics used by each couple. However, some men did give up their careers to raise children or take a career break while their wife took over the lead career. The female expatriates did not report difficulties with this but further research to hear the voices of male partners in this context is needed. This research examined heterosexual relationships only; research into how same-sex couples mobilise their chosen dual-career coordination strategy is also required.

## **Conclusion**

This research reveals how female expatriates in dual-career relationships mobilise effort to secure work opportunities which give the most positive career and relationship outcomes for themselves and their partners. By actively working with their own and their partner's organisations if necessary and using tactics of cooperation and coordination, they pursue dual-career compatible roles and co-working opportunities. Women assignees also place particular emphasis on coordinating the timing and location of dual-career expatriate work to reduce periods of separation from their partners, seeing this as instrumental to maintaining the couple's relationship. This research extends the work of Käsälä *et al.* (2015) relating to hierarchical, egalitarian and loose dual-career strategies. Compatible roles can provide more egalitarian career outcomes than co-working due to the difficulties of gaining two appropriate roles together in one firm in the same location; co-working can lead to disappointing hierarchical rather than anticipated egalitarian dual-career outcomes for female expatriates. Women assignees who have followed a loose dual-career strategy with their partners, seek a more egalitarian approach. When their partners undertake non-geographically mobile careers,

women expatriates undertake complementary assignment types which can not only maximise egalitarian career outcomes but also the time that a couple can spend together.

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**Table 1: Female Expatriate Interviewee Profiles**

Participant number	Sending region	Current host region	Current assignment type	Previous assignments	Occupation	Management grade	Living together/apart	Partner employment	Age band of female assignee	Number of children and ages
<b>Firm 1</b>										
#2	Western Europe	Caribbean	Long-term	1 Long-term	Geologist	Junior	Living with partner + children	Co-working in host country; in lead role	40-44	3 (ages 7, 5 and 5)
#3	Western Europe	North America	Short-term		Graduate Trainee	Graduate Trainee	Living apart	Working in home country	25-29	
#5	Australasia	West Africa	Long-term		Analyst	Junior	Living with partner	Co-working in host country; in junior role	40-44	
#10	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	1 Short-term + 2 Long-term	Business Development	Junior	Living apart	Working in home country	Not disclosed	
#14	Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term	2 Long-term	Commercial	Middle	Living with partner	Co-working in host country; in equal role	40-44	
#17	Western Europe	Middle East	Long-term	1 Rotation	Engineer	Junior	Living with partner when he is off rotation	Working on rotation	35-39	
#20	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term		IT Specialist	Junior	Living with partner	Co-working in host country; in lead role	40-44	
#24	Western Europe	Western Europe	Long-term	3 Short-term	Economist	Junior	Living with partner and child	Co-working in host country; in lead role	25-29	1 (new baby)
#26	Australasia	Central Asia	Rotation		Communications	Middle	Living with partner when she is off rotation	Working in home country	30-34	
#33	Western Europe	Australasia	Long-term	1 Commuter	Performance Manager	Middle	Living with partner	Co-working in host country; in junior role	30-34	

#35	Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	1 Long-term	Commercial	Senior	Living with partner and child	Not working in host country	35-39	1 (age 1)
#39	Western Europe	North Africa	Long-term	2 Long-term	Lawyer	Middle	Living with partner and child	Working in host country	40-44	1 (new baby)
#44	Caribbean	North America	Long-term		Lawyer	Middle	Living with child; living apart from partner	Working in home country	40-44	1 (age 14)
#46	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	1 Short-term + 2 Long-term	Geologist	Middle	Living with partner and children	Not working in host country	35-39	2 (ages 6 and 2)
#50	Western Europe	Central Asia	Long-term		Commercial	Middle	Living apart	Working in home country	40-44	
#52	Western Europe	Central Asia	Rotation	1 Short-term	Human Resources	Middle	Living with partner when she is off rotation	Working in home country	40-44	
<b>Firm 2</b>										
#56	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term		Engineer	Middle	Living with partner and child	Not working in host country	40-44	1 (age 1)
#59	Western Europe	North Africa	Rotation		Geologist	Junior	Living with partner when she is off rotation	Working in home country	30-34	Pregnant
#60	Western Europe	East Asia	Long-term	2 Long-term	Geologist	Junior	Living with partner and child	Working in host country	30-34	1 (age 2) + pregnant
#63	North America	East Asia	Long-term	1 Long-term	Geophysicist	Junior	Living with partner	Working in host country	35-39	

## **Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview questions**

1. Does your partner work/where? What type of assignment is he undertaking, if applicable? Is your assignment accompanied or not? Issues? Expand/explain.
  
2. Did the expatriation process work well for you as a couple? Explain. What role did the International Assignments (IA) team play?
  
3. What do you see as the key elements in the IA package that support dual-career couples? If applicable, how has spouse/partner company support, such as visa assistance, helped you to undertake your IA(s)? Which aspects have been particularly helpful in supporting your partner's expatriate participation? Explain. Have there been any changes to policy that have been helpful? If yes, explain.
  
4. What level of work would you say you were both working at/who holds the lead career? How do you balance your careers/does one take priority? What specific actions have you taken to achieve your and your partner's career goals?  
Expand/explain.
  
- 5.