COMMUTING COUPLES**

1. General


This article features couples who enjoy their commuter marriages and who feel that their arrangements reduce feelings of resentment about managing dual-careers. Dahl discusses experiences with social stigma and evidence that some employers avoid hiring or promoting commuters. The head of an executive search firm is quoted as saying that some employers believe that commuters may be less committed to their jobs than non-commuters.


Getschow profiles a group of long distance couples who experienced adjustment problems. Some of them divorced, and others stopped commuting. He mentions American Airlines' prohibition on commuting when it moved from New York to Dallas, and he discusses another firm's policy of attempting to find both spouses jobs in those cases where one of the marriage partners is asked to relocate for the company.


This article is representative of a genre describing the problems and benefits of the commuting couple's lifestyle. Articles of this type began to appear in 1976 in publications such as the New York Times, Vogue, and the Wall Street Journal and have continued ever since. Kantrowitz reports on a study of 50 couples in which more than half felt that they had benefitted from a commuter's relationship. Indeed, the divorce rate among the commuters studied was 10% compared to 50% for traditional couples.


* Prepared by Carol Tobin, Reference Librarian.
** Items from this list should be ordered directly from the publisher. Addresses are given in connection with each reference.
The authors study four major problem areas possible in the life of a commuter which they term psychological, social, career, and situational dilemmas. Modes of adaptation for dealing with each are discussed. For example, the authors suggest that because of the additional money required to maintain this lifestyle, dual-career couples should factor this need in when negotiating an employment contract. It is suggested that successful adaptation to the lifestyle requires a strong sense of identity on the part of both parties and communication systems that provide emotional support.


The Rhodes, a commuting couple, interviewed a number of other commuter marriage partners. The article discusses their findings and those of other researchers of this lifestyle. One estimate puts the number of commuter marriages in the United States at 700,000. Many such couples are academics, and most are white, middle to upper class professionals, half of whom have children. Sidebars cover considerations before commuting as well as legal issues.


Winfield’s work is a synthesis of much of what has been published on the commuter marriage. It also draws together practical advice for the commuter, e.g., renting houses to each other. One chapter discusses common corporate responses and gives examples of different company policies, e.g., use of company phones, flexible hours, reimbursement for travel. The final chapter includes a questionnaire “To commute or not to commute.” The possible responses to it are then analyzed. A model for a successful commuter marriage follows.

2. SURVEYS


Gilliland studied twelve dual-career couples and their problems relating to career requirements of geographic mobility and relocation. Six of the twelve couples responded in the affirmative when asked if they would be willing to commute. In a follow-up interview, one respondent who had expressed an unwillingness to commute changed her mind after relocating without a job and finding it difficult to obtain one. She felt that she would commute if she did not find a job in her field in two years.

This review of research on commuter marriages includes five empirical studies and a discussion of the demographic characteristics of commuters. Results suggest that this lifestyle is on the increase. Studies also show that commuting spouses tend to compartmentalize work and family and concentrate more on work when alone. However, after too long a separation, productivity is reduced, especially among husbands. The authors conclude that in order to encourage high productivity, employers should help facilitate frequent reunions between spouses.


Gerstel and Gross interviewed 121 commuters and 82 merchant marine husbands and their wives. The book focuses on the commuter marriages and uses the merchant marine sample to show that this new form of marriage differs in a number of ways from earlier separated families. It looks at family structures in relation to family and career stages, and provides a model of potential stress levels in various types of family structure. Under certain limited conditions, the authors find that commuting can be the best pattern. Based on the survey, they discuss factors that make commuting more or less difficult. For example, separation of more than a month is quite difficult.

3. RELOCATION AND OTHER PERSONAL CONCERNS


This article suggests ways that dual-career couples can plan to ease or avoid career conflicts. One of the possibilities put forth for dealing with relocation is the establishment of separate households. This was one of a small number of personnel articles that suggest commuting as an alternative to relocation for both spouses.


The authors discuss the problems that the effective management of dual-career couples pose for personnel departments, particularly in the areas of nepotism and relocation. Three types of couples are examined: same career, same firm; different careers, same firm; and different company, same or different career. New practices for dealing with each type in areas of recruitment, nepotism, transfers, scheduling, and training and development are presented. The article suggests that companies should consider offering special travel and housing allowances to couples who must live apart during a relocation transition period, e.g., a research chemist who needs six months to finish a project before relocating with the spouse.

In a general discussion of relocation, Matthews describes commuting as a possible choice. Problems associated with commuting are noted, such as costs in time and money, lack of social acceptability, negative reactions in the workplace, loss of a support system in separation from the family, and personal loneliness and isolation. The author suggests reimbursement of bi-monthly travel expense to visit a spouse as an optional relocation benefit during the initial transition period.


In discussing relocation, Maynard and Zawacki list a number of options including commuting. This is one of the first articles in personnel literature to report on long distance marriage as one alternative in transfer situations. The authors note both benefits and problems in a commuting marriage.

4. Academic Commuters


The authors found that in 1976 commuting to work within a hundred mile radius was becoming more common among academic couples, and estimated that such couples indeed numbered in the thousands. The article focuses on the barriers to commuting among faculty women, including an obligation for personal involvement in the local community. They argue that regular availability to students and the institution is more important than constant high visibility in the surrounding area.


Commuting academics are said to form a substantial portion of all long distance couples in this 1986 article. They are found to exhibit the traits of a typical commuting marriage. A number of couples are profiled, and problems of nepotism and tenure are noted. Couples wherein both teach at the college or university level are the most significant recruiting problem, according to one Dean of the Faculty who was interviewed. The flexibility inherent in academic schedules is helpful, but universities are not doing as much as private industry to help the commuting couple in other areas. The article includes a sidebar on "Deciding to commute: some issues."