

Dual-Career Support: A Viable Solution

This is the second of two articles dealing with dual-career recruiting. Last month's article, "The Give and Take between Two Careers and a Family," described one highly visible couple's experience and the reactions of their colleagues.

The so-called "trailing spouse" (or accompanying partner) issue is a major worry both for professionals who are considering relocating and for employers who are concerned with retention after the expense of recruitment. Spousal employment challenges and the inability of families to assimilate into their new surroundings are among the major reasons why recruited employees leave their new positions.



Angela McNerney

An innovative approach to address these issues was designed by Tech Valley Connect (TVC) to provide multiple services to newly relocated professionals and their families in the New York Capital Region near Albany. Piloted in July of 2009 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as an innovative way to address retention, TVC is a not-for-profit consortium of area employers (academic, healthcare, high-tech, corporate, nonprofit, and more) and has become a strong part of the Capital Region infrastructure. The initiative has helped to bolster local economies while increasing retention rates for area employers.

The TVC program provides relocated professionals, including many academic scientists, with dual-career support as well as helping them with family assimilation and cultural transitions. Participation in the program begins when an employer who is a member of the consortium (e.g., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, State University of New York at Albany) refers a new hire and his or her family to TVC. Once the family has made contact, an in-depth evaluation session is scheduled in which the family speaks confidentially with a coordinator, who will be assigned to the family for one year.

Helping a Spouse or Partner to Find Employment

A professional who is recruited from outside the region is often concerned about finding appropriate employment for his or her spouse or partner. TVC's spouse/partner employment program takes a unique approach to the problem: Its coordinators set up informational networking interviews for the spouse or

partner with decision makers from within the consortium who are in the spouse/partner's discipline.

These informational interviews are not job interviews—they are opportunities to have access to management and begin the process of building a substantive professional network. The conversation is more specific and the dynamic of the meeting is different than they would be in a formal interview. And these face-to-face meetings have a more powerful impact than emailing CVs and responding to job postings. A spouse or partner meets professionals who may have inside knowledge about local colleagues who are looking for quality candidates or may be able to introduce them to others in their field, broadening the spouse's or partner's web of contacts. Based on data from the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 70% of employed people got their jobs through some form of networking.¹ We believe this rate is higher among professionals, which may be related to that population being the most difficult to retain.

Helping Families to Assimilate

To help with family assimilation, a coordinator conducts a thorough evaluation of the family



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to determine the members' specific needs and what resources they require. A customized portfolio is prepared for each family connecting them to qualified, vetted resources within the Capital Region. TVC coordinators are equipped to offer newcomers suggestions for resources such as trusted mechanics, electricians, and house painters as well as physicians, dentists, veterinarians, and specialty and ethnic grocery stores.

The coordinator attempts to engage the family in social events, local venues, and volunteer opportunities to help assimilate them into their new surroundings. Local school districts have identified student leaders who can help incoming students integrate into the school's population and culture. Entertainment venues such as theaters and concert halls have sponsored free tickets to productions with a "meet and greet" beforehand for families to engage with one another. The attendees include newcomers to the area as well as established professionals.

The TVC coordinator becomes a confidential sounding board, steering family members toward resources that will ultimately enhance their quality of life. Integrating new people into a local economy is critical in terms of economic development. TVC is a trusted conduit for people who arrive in the Capital Region not knowing where to start.

Helping Foreign Nationals Understand U.S. Culture

Foreign nationals face even harder challenges when relocating to the United States. For example, one of our foreign national clients had no idea how to use an American oven. Another had limited language skills and could not figure out how to put gas in her car. And a third didn't think she could have children over to her house because she had heard "Americans all sue one another."

In response to such problems, TVC is launching a Cultural Transition Program to help assimilate people to U.S. culture, customs, and traditions. We have sought partnerships with area groups associated with the international sector to create well-rounded and educational workshops. Staff has been certified in Cross

Cultural Competence at the Interchange Institute in Boston, MA. TVC workshops will cover a comprehensive agenda to include topics such as education, healthcare, banking, government, and households. The program is set to start in July in a pilot phase and will launch in earnest in September

We project that our Cultural Transition Program will become central to our region's infrastructure as we increase efforts to accommodate a more sophisticated international population. Being able to offer understanding and a means to learn about U.S. culture that includes focused guidance to local resources can give families the tools they need to transition successfully. Giving employees a good quality of life is essential when striving for retention.

Making Connections by Volunteering

Another TVC program to help professionals who have recently moved integrate into the Capital Region is the Strategic Volunteer Initiative. This effort consists of a structured community service program connecting newly relocated professionals with volunteer opportunities in the region.

Volunteering in a community can lead to professional and personal networking, building relationships needed to strengthen ties to the area. About 20% of the families assisted by TVC are families of foreign nationals whose spouse/partner may not have a work visa. We are able to link them to not-for-profit organizations closely connected to their professional backgrounds, where they can volunteer their services, keeping them professionally relevant as well as offsetting resume gaps. The commitment of time for volunteering serves

as a means to meet people who share common interests and is a way to integrate both socially and professionally into the region.

Measuring Success

Professionals and top executives typically are the most expensive hires for employers and at the most risk for voluntary turnover. The cost to an employer is astronomical when it does not retain its new hire: between two

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and five times the salary of the original hire, depending on the factors involved with the recruitment. In contrast, TVC charges less than 4% of what it would cost to lose an employee. There are discounted packages for volume referrals. Thus employers are willing to broaden their scope beyond focusing resources on the recruitment end and are now looking to invest in retention.

TVC's metric for success is retention of the original hire for at least three years. According to the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average national voluntary turnover rate in 2011 was 9.1%.² (At that rate, the cost of turnover can exceed \$20,000,000 annually for a company with 1,000 employees and an average salary of \$75,000.)

TVC has been operating for three years (as of July 2012) and as an independent not-for-profit organization for two years. In that period, 75 families have been referred to the program and none of the original hires has left his or her position. Although this number is not a representative sample size yet, we say we are currently operating under our target of 3% voluntary turnover per year. Statistically, we know we will lose people eventually, but after three years our record is certainly a phenomenal testament to TVC's approach.

The TVC model has been tested in a community with large employers from varying sectors (higher education, healthcare, high tech;

corporate and government) and found highly effective. Even after 10 years, if we are reducing employee turnover by roughly 60% we will

have kept significant dollars not only within the region, but within the businesses themselves. In addition, because TVC is the only organization in the country right now with a regional commitment from employers to spousal employment, it is helping to distinguish the Capital region from competing regions in attracting new businesses and talent. The membership has grown from 12 institutions in the pilot phase to 45 members to date.

If TVC's noteworthy success in reducing voluntary turnover continues, it will have made significant strides in addressing the dual-career issue. And when a heavily recruited professional considers whether his or her spouse/partner will have meaningful opportunities for

employment, employers in the Capital Region will have the advantage of being able to offer a structured organization that attends to these specific needs over the course of one year. ■

—Angela McNerney, *Tech Valley Connect, Inc.*

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¹Beatty K (2010). The math behind the networking claim. <http://blog.jobfully.com/2010/07/the-math-behind-the-networking-claim>. Accessed 13 June 2012.

²Bares A (2011). 2011 turnover rates by industry. www.compensationforce.com/2011/10/2011-turnover-rates-by-industry.html. Accessed 13 June 2012.

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—Thea Clarke