

## Report on **Business**

Careers: The hardest commute

### When work forces families to live apart

As the ranks of the unemployed swell, a growing number of people are being forced to relocate far from their families

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Every Sunday afternoon, Paul Kendrick hops into a rental car and makes the 4½-hour trek from Ottawa to Toronto, parting from his family until the following Friday evening.

"It's certainly not the lifestyle I want," he says - but it is one that has been forced on him by this economy.

Ten months ago, Mr. Kendrick found himself out of work when his contract as a senior program officer with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. was not renewed. That ended a decade-long career with CMHC.

Mr. Kendrick, 51, spent months following his job loss looking for a new position in the nation's capital. When 400 applications failed to land him work, he was forced to take his search further afield. It finally paid off in mid-October, when he was hired to deliver training programs at Pearson International Airport in Toronto.

While he's happy to be working again, and earning a similar salary, it meant a tough choice for Mr. Kendrick, his wife, Francine, and their two sons: To keep the paycheques coming in, the family has been forced into a long-distance relationship.

It's a growing phenomenon in this tough economy, where moving for work may be the only alternative to unemployment.

But such relocations are also splitting some families apart: With more dual-income couples, the other spouse may have a job and fear giving up secure employment, or worry about the possibilities in this economy of both finding work in the same place. Reluctance to uproot families also weighs in.

For the Kendricks and others in the same situation, relocation and long-distance relationships are a better choice than the hardships of unemployment.

"When the right position comes along, where it is located matters much less than in the past," says Lynn Lochbihler, a partner at Hamilton-based human resources consulting firm HR-Fusion.

While there are no statistics, based on what she's heard from job hunters she works with, Ms. Lohbihler estimates the number in the Kendricks' predicament has doubled since the economy nosedived last fall.

"People are choosing to live separately because they need work and money and, the longer they are out of a job, the harder it is to find a job," Ms. Lochbihler says.

When Calgary recruiter Julia Cordray works with couples where one spouse has lost a job, one of the first questions she asks is, 'Are you willing to relocate?'

"They all say, for the right opportunity, they would consider it," says Ms. Cordray, recruiting director for Career Fox Inc., a recruitment and job placement company. She calls that a sea change from rosier times, "when most would say no unless they had family in another city that they wanted to get closer to."

The decision does not come without challenges, ranging from financial to emotional.

Mr. Kendrick has so far been living rent-free with friends, but once he finds his own place, he expects to shell out several hundred dollars a month for room and board, in addition to the car rental, gas and food expenses that are already eating up \$1,200 of his monthly earnings.

"Honestly, I'd rather take a salary decrease than be doing this," says Mr. Kendrick, whose wife retired but has elected to stay in Ottawa so as not to uproot their 19- and 21-year-old sons.

Beyond the costs of travel and maintaining two households, there's also an emotional toll and plenty of stress. Mr. Kendrick misses his family, in particular, Sunday dinners and dispensing advice to his kids.

"I was not there to help my son when he broke up with his girlfriend," he laments.

"And there is stress 24/7 from being on the road, worrying about whether the car will break down, and having to learn a new city and all the routes I have to drive. You're living in two homes and you do not feel a sense of community or belonging. It is a very transient lifestyle."

So how do they cope?

Mr. Kendrick's sons have taken on extra responsibilities around the house. To keep the lines of communication open, family members touch base regularly by cellphone, texting and instant messaging.

Mr. Kendrick's 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. work schedule has been a double bonus: He avoids the worst of Toronto's rush hour traffic to and from work, and can also make it home on Fridays by mid-evening. "If you can negotiate a schedule that gets you more time with your wife and kids, I highly recommend it," he says.

Such strategies are bang on, says Monika Morrow, Toronto-based vice-president of career management for North America for staffing service Right Management Inc. She says long-distance relationships are best survived by those with strong marriages and plenty of support.

"It is all about how well you can partner together to raise your family and how you can share the load," she says.

Working and living separately has a better chance of success in families with a stay-at-home parent, or where one or both spouses has previously worked at a job involving travel and long periods away, Ms. Cordray adds.

Because a new job may provide less earnings but require more expenses, families need to try to stockpile some cash, says certified financial planner Scott Plaskett, chief executive officer at Ironshield

Financial Planning in Toronto. And while it may be tough to be apart, Ms. Cordray recommends that families don't even consider joining a relocated spouse until they are sure that person is happy in a new job and surroundings.

"No big decisions should be made until there is a huge benefit that can outweigh the hardship of selling a house, getting the spouse to quit their job, and getting the kids out of school and into a new city," she says.

### **UP CLOSE: 300 KILOMETRES APART**

#### **Jody and Tanya Kelly, Lansdowne, N.B.**

**Situation:** After completing a community college computer course and finding himself unable to find career-related work closer to home, Mr. Kelly moved in August more than 300 kilometres away to take a customer service and technical support job with Sitel Corp. in Moncton.

Every Monday, he drives 270 kilometres to Petitcodiac, where he lives during the week with his parents. From there, he drives another 45 kilometres to Moncton, where he works the 4:30 p.m. to 12 a.m. shift. By 3 a.m. on Saturday, he is back in Lansdowne with his wife and their two young daughters.

**Outcome:** After weighing the pros and cons of separation, the couple agreed it was vital that Mr. Kelly gain experience, fearing too much time without a job in his chosen field would render his training useless.

"The method to our madness is that Jody will go to Moncton and get the experience he needs, then come back home [to work]," Ms. Kelly says. "There are companies in our area that could eventually use his skills."

The Kellys toyed with relocating to Moncton but that's easier said than done, says Ms. Kelly, who works as a graphic designer and packaging co-ordinator for McCain International Inc. in Florenceville, N.B. Their house likely won't sell quickly and Ms. Kelly won't easily find work, she says. The move would also force them to look for a new daycare provider and separate them from friends.

**Biggest challenges:** Being apart for five days every week leaves Ms. Kelly in charge of the house and the couple's young daughters while holding down a full-time job. There are also money concerns, ensuring Mr. Kelly's travel and living expenses don't eat up too much of his salary. The couple is running at "seven or eight out of 10 on the stress scale," Ms. Kelly confesses.

**How they cope:** Ms. Kelly prioritizes chores, putting off larger tasks until her husband returns on weekends. And they communicate often. "We call or send MSN messages regularly to keep the flame burning," she says. Although Mr. Kelly spends \$450 a month on gas and meals, living with his parents in exchange for chores during the week helps cut costs. They bought a second car but ensured it was a gas miser and shopped around to keep a lid on insurance premiums.

**Best advice:** "Make your family time count - do things together. We go to church together on Sundays, and it is one great way for us to cope," she says.

### **UP CLOSE: SEPARATED FOR FIVE MONTHS**

#### **Wayne and Leigh St, John, Edmonton**

**Situation:** The couple and their two young sons were separated for five months. Their troubles began in 2007, when cutbacks cost Mr. St. John, 39, his sales job in Calgary with an oil and gas industry equipment company. Five months later, he was hired by a Calgary hydraulics company but lost that in October, 2008, because of the continuing oil and gas sector slowdown.

Unable to find a senior sales or marketing job in the Calgary area, Mr. St. John earlier this year began to split his time between his home in High River, south of Calgary, and Edmonton, where he was chasing job leads, then moved into a basement apartment in Edmonton to concentrate on his job hunt and avoid the repeated seven-hour round trips between there and home.

The move meant he left behind his wife, who had a job as an administrator with Alberta Health Services, and their two children. Minus his salary, the family finances took a severe hit and the bank foreclosed on their home last spring.

**Outcome:** The strategy paid off: In April, Mr. St. John was finally hired as a national accounts manager with an occupational testing company in Edmonton. A month later, Ms. St. John found work as a project administrator with an engineering company in the same city. The couple and their six- and nine-year-old sons were reunited under the same roof in a rented home in Edmonton.

**Biggest challenge:** While living separately, Mr. St. John was paying \$750 a month in rent, plus several hundred dollars more for food, gas and motel bills for weekend trips to meet his family halfway.

That was on top of the hefty \$5,400 a month the family spent to keep their large High River house running and for childcare expenses and groceries. "Living apart was killing us," says Ms. St. John, who also suffers from health problems.

**How they coped:** They cut back on expenses. "We pulled the kids out of sports and, if we couldn't afford it, we wouldn't go out for dinner," Ms. St. John says.

Communication was also key. The family kept in daily contact by phone and saw each other on as many weekends as possible, either when Mr. St. John returned home or when they and their two children met at a motel in Red Deer, halfway between Calgary and Edmonton.

**Best advice:** "We pulled through it because we were honest with each other," Ms. St. John says.

## **Making it work: Tips from the experts**

### **Work with the boss to work with family**

- Try to negotiate a compressed workweek or some telecommuting to stretch time at home with family.

### **Keep in touch**

- Use technology to stay in regular touch with family, from phones to web cams to e-mail.

### **Ask for assistance**

- See if your employer will support your travel costs.

### **Cut back**

- With more costs to maintain two households and commuting to see family, cut as many discretionary expenses as possible. Hold off making contributions to savings plans.

### **Get the family on board**

- Don't take a job away unless the family is in agreement. Clearly delineate responsibilities around the house while you're gone. With one parent left to fend for the house, don't sweat the small stuff, such as laundry.

### **Don't move everyone until you're sure**

- Be certain a relocated spouse is happy in a new job and surroundings before considering uprooting the rest of the family.

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