Two-Body Job Searches

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If you and your significant other (SO) are both going to be looking for jobs at the same time, you may face challenges not encountered in single-body job searches. If you must also consider the needs of children or other relatives, the task becomes even more complex. Of course, if you are lucky, your SO is seeking the type of job that can be found almost anywhere; maybe he is a kindergarten teacher, a physician specializing in internal medicine, or an Oracle DBA. In this article, we describe some of the complications that you may experience if you are not so lucky: you have a PhD in computer science and your SO is in a hard-to-place job category, and the two of you would like to live in the same metropolitan area. We will discuss the questions of how wide a net to cast in sending out resumes, whether to mention your two-body situation up front, timing considerations, interviewing together or separately, cancelling interviews, the negotiation stage. We will consider both academic and non-academic positions, with special attention to some of the trickier points of academic job searches. In addressing these questions, we will draw on our combined personal experience of two-body job hunts as recent as 2003 and as long ago as 1987, along with information gleaned from the two-body job searches of friends and colleagues. At the end of the article, we give references for further reading.

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How wide a net to cast. Your job search will diverge from that of a single-body job hunt as soon as you start sending out your resume. For example, suppose that you and your SO are both looking for academic jobs and on paper, the two of you seem to have approximately the same amount of academic promise. You will be surprised how often a university will want to interview or hire one of you and not the other. Further, which one of you gets the thumbs-up will vary from university to university! This can be due to how your academic specialty fits with the current needs of the department, and also due to how your personality and character is perceived to fit with the rest of the department. More generally, the jobs that the two of you eventually accept will probably be at places that you would rate lower on your list than *either* of the two places where you would accept positions if you were doing two separate job searches instead of a single two-body job search. This holds for both academic and industrial research lab job searches.

So, how many extra resumes should you send out? If you are looking for a research-oriented

academic position, then you can look at the US News & World Report's list of the research rankings of different computer science departments. Choose a cutoff point in the rankings, such that you do not want to accept a position at any university below your cutoff. In making this decision, remember to set your sights somewhat lower than if you were doing a single-body job search. Then find out which of the departments above the cutoff are looking for people like you, by looking at the departments' web sites and/or the Computing Research Association's job advertisements. You can use your personal contacts at the relevant departments to find out more information. If you are interested in working at an industrial research lab, then you will not have published research rankings to guide you, but this will not cause much difficulty as the industrial DB research labs are quite well known within the DB community.

In identifying where to send your resumes, you need to spend more time doing research than your single-bodied colleagues. Once you have a list of major metropolitan areas that have companies or schools where you'd like to work, then you need to see what opportunities there might be for your spouse in each of those areas. This is not a time to make assumptions---do your homework! The web will tell you much of what you need to know, and contacts at the place where you'd like to work can help you to fill in the blanks. When we talk to top candidates who have applied to our own department, we can tell that a candidate is really serious about coming to Illinois when she starts telling us about the various places where her SO could work. Invariably, she has missed a few, and we always like to do our own research and fill her in on the additional possible employment opportunities for her SO.

Should you send resumes only to companies and universities in cities where you could both find work, or should you also include additional places where only one of you could live? You and your SO will have to work through this one together, of course, but in general, you need to have *some* emergency backup plan. Your backup plans could involve another year in school while you build your resume, a postdoc, an ordinary industrial R&D position, a year at home with the baby until industrial hiring picks up again, or living apart for a period of time.

When to mention the existence of your SO. In the US, it is illegal for a prospective employer to ask you about your spouse and children. The idea is that we should not discriminate against you based on your family status. This discrimination can cut both ways; for example, an employer might assume that if you don't have kids, then you will be able to work longer and harder than if you do. Or a potential employer might assume that if you aren't married, you won't want to live in the employer's quiet little town for very long.

Of course, a prospective employer may want to know about your family status for more benign reasons. For example, as alluded to above, when hiring at Illinois we like to make sure that a candidate knows about potential employment opportunities for his or her SO, because that may be a crucial point in the candidate's final decision to come here. This is hard to do unless we know the SO's field. We also like to make sure that our interviewees know about our great preschools, high schools, family recreation opportunities, etc., without frightening candidates who have never even considered having kids. The legally approved approach is to offer the information to the candidate without asking any family status questions ("Would you like to hear about the educational system for children in Champaign-Urbana?").

The choice of when to reveal your two-body situation is up to you. In general, the later you reveal your situation, the more likely that you will get a job offer but the less help you will get in resolving your two-body problem. Options include:

- *Never*. As implied above, potential employers should not ask you directly. If asked

directly, you can simply say that you do not have a two-body problem, and leave it at that. Even the densest interviewer should realize at that point that to probe further would be to tread on improper ground.

- *When you start to get positive feedback from the interview.* You might be chatting with the department head or department chair at the end of your interview, or in a followup phone call, or have a verbal or written offer in hand.
- *During the interview visit itself.* If you aren't already getting positive feedback from the interview, this is an awkward time for first mentioning your two-body situation. Mentioning it a bit sooner or a bit later will probably serve your ends better.
- *When you get the interview offer.* Two of us used this approach most of the time during our academic job search in 2002, and felt that the timing worked well. Note that bringing up the two-body situation when one of you gets an interview may or may not help the other one to get an interview. In particular, based on our own experience, do not expect more help from schools that explicitly state that academic couples are encouraged to apply.
- *In the cover letter that you send out with your resume.* If you are applying for a job in Nome, Alaska, then you might as well tell your prospective employer about your two-body situation right away. The employer will realize how important a factor this is for all applicants.

You and your SO need to coordinate your interview dates. Otherwise, you will be at a significant disadvantage compared to other people on the job market.

The longer you wait to reveal your two-body situation, the less help you should expect from your potential employer in resolving it. In fact, a department in an obscure location might be quite upset if you don't mention your SO at all, and then suddenly bring it up as a potential condition for employment. The department might need considerable lead time to find suitable employment opportunities for your SO, or might feel that you had been toying with them by letting them go through the considerable effort of generating an offer before bringing up this potentially showstopper issue. In general, departments in obscure locations are quite sensitive to the SO employment issue, and will appreciate learning about potential two-body problems as early as you are willing to disclose them.

You also have a choice regarding how much you reveal at each point. For example, at the beginning of your job search, you may not be sure that you and your SO can find jobs in the same city. At that point you are willing to accept an interview offer for an otherwise-attractive position A in a city where your SO will probably not be able to find a job. However, later on in the job-hunting cycle, you and your SO both receive offers for jobs in city B. At that point, your job-hunting criteria change. You can then announce that your interest in position A is now predicated on your SO also finding nearby employment.

A few rules of thumb for the situation where you and your SO are only willing to move to city X if you both receive offers there:

1. If you are both applying to the same organization, and you do not have other employment options in city X, then you should consider mentioning your two-body situation in your cover letter. This will decrease the chances that only one of you gets an interview offer, but will in general increase the chances that you both do. If you do not mention it in your cover letter, you need to mention it when you get an interview offer. The advantage of not mentioning it in the cover letter is that you will get a truer picture of which one of you (or both) the organization is really interested in hiring. (Of course, this is also the disadvantage of mentioning it in your cover letters.) This information is helpful in estimating the chances of getting offers from a school during the decision-making stage.

2. If you think it likely that you will both receive job offers in city X (e.g., if Silicon Valley has many places where each of you could work), then there is no need to mention the situation at any point.

Canceling interviews. While the following comments apply to both single-body and two-body job searches, we include them here because two-body searches may be expecially likely to require interview cancellations.

If your situation changes during the job hunt process, it is fine to cancel a scheduled interview. Organizing and carrying out an interview visit takes a tremendous amount of time and effort on the part of all parties involved, and an organization would rather learn that you no longer are interested in working there **before** its employees spend a two days of their time talking to you. If you are no longer interested, canceling is the best course even if your airline tickets have already been purchased. Similarly, if you determine that you don't want to go to a particular place after interviewing there, tell them that as soon as possible, and **before** they go through the effort of creating an official offer.

Interviewing together or separately. If both of you interview at the same organization, some organizations offer the option of having you both interview at the same time. We do not recommend this. As SOs, you will be compared to each other over and over by your employers. These comparisons can be very destructive to your relationship, even if (perhaps especially if) both of you are strong in your field. You want to discourage people from comparing the two of you to each other. To do that, it helps to emphasize your separateness from the start, i.e., even at the interview. For that same reason, well-known CS researchers often say that it is best for spouses to use two different last names at work.

Scheduling interviews separately has the additional advantage that the person who goes through the interview first at a certain organization can give her SO a great deal of useful and up-to-date information to help him prepare for his interview at that organization.

An academic department may sometimes be concerned about hiring a couple, especially if the two people have been collaborating with each other. An academic department may be worried about not being able to identify each individual's achievement for tenure evaluation. They may also worry that close interaction between the couple will reduce their collaboration with other colleagues.

Interview timing. The academic recruiting season for junior faculty is very rigid: it runs from February through the end of April, and if you don't find a position during that period, you are out of luck until next year. Further, the supply and demand for junior academics in CS varies enormously from year to year. For example, in the internet boom years, everyone wanted to hire DB faculty, but few DB faculty candidates could be lured away from startups. Now academic

demand is down slightly, research labs aren't doing much hiring, and startups aren't hiring either. As a result, the supply of people looking for academic positions has risen sharply, making competition for academic positions more intense. The unfortunate fallout from this problem is that the "best" candidates (on paper) interview very widely but take only one position, thus reducing the number of interview slots open to other candidates and increasing the number of unfilled positions.

Some academic departments make offers on a rolling basis; others wait until they have seen all candidates before making any offers; many use a hybrid approach. Further, industrial offers often require that you start a job quite soon after the offer is made, while academic offers are usually for jobs that start in September, and often a delay of a year in arriving is acceptable. Further, some job offers have no expiration date, while others have a two-week deadline, or even less. Sometimes the offerers are willing to extend deadlines, and other times they are not. Rigidity with respect to deadlines is not necessarily a bad sign: if your prospective employer really wants to hire some new people, then they need to make an offer to someone else if you turn them down. If they wait too long and you eventually turn them down, then their next-choice candidate may already have accepted an offer elsewhere.

These timing issues have significant repercussions for you. First, industrial interviewing is hard to coordinate with the rigid academic interviewing cycle. If you will not graduate until August, you may have completed all your academic interviewing before you are ready to do any industrial interviews. You may have to decide on your academic job offers before you have *had* any industrial interviews.

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Second, you and your SO need to coordinate your interview dates. Suppose that you and your SO are interviewing with the same organization A which makes rolling offers, and you will not accept a job offer at A unless you both have offers there. If your interview is in February and your SO's is in May, then you are at a significant disadvantage compared to A's other interviewees. Either you will receive one offer that expires before the SO has even interviewed at A, or else A's employees will not be able to make up their minds about the two of you until the end of the interviewing season. If A makes rolling offers, you and your SO really need to interview at A close together in time.

Third, as mentioned above, if your interviews are spread out across the season, then you may have an offer in hand that will expire before you even go to some of your later interviews. This unpleasant situation means that you need to cluster your interviews together as closely as possible, even if it means foregoing other worthwhile activities (vacations, conferences,

submission deadlines, sanity breaks). While this is true for single-body job searches as well, when there are two of you, you are more likely to face this particular problem.

Negotiation. Don't be surprised if your and your SO's offers from the same place are not identical, even if your actual startup needs are similar. The offerer is aware that you will compare the two offers and note the differences. Perhaps the psychological motivation for making unequal offers is that during the negotiation phase, you may be satisfied once you get the two offers to be equal. Also, you may get less money for moving expenses than your single-body colleagues (which is not particularly fair, if you consider the possibility of both of you getting jobs in the same town but with different organizations).

Two-body job searches can be daunting, and we hope that this article hasn't frightened you too much. In closing, remember that:
- Your search won't last forever, and with a little flexibility you will probably find yourself living in the same city as your SO.
- You don't know the internal politics/needs that may lead to your getting or not getting a job/interview offer from a particular place, so don't take the outcome personally. Similarly, don't let it turn into a competitive situation with your SO.

Suggestions for further reading:

- "Interviewing during a tight job market," by Qiong Luo and Zachary G. Ives, in SIGMOD Record, September 2002.
- "On the academic interview circuit: An end-to-end discussion," by Ugur Centintemel, in SIGMOD Record, December 2001. This guide offers a detailed single-body job hunt description.
- "Tips for a massive academic job search," by Ellen Spertus, at http://www.mills.edu/ACAD_INFO/MCS/SPERTUS/job-search/job.html. This fairly comprehensive guide also discusses two-body job search issues.

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