Scandinavian Fairy Tale

To American scientists struggling with two-career marriages, the story of Elisabeth Lindner-Olsson and Anders Olsson may sound a little like a fairy tale. That's because these two chemical engineers live in Sweden—one of the world's most advanced countries for women's rights and support of working parents. Living in a "family-friendly" society has helped them hold demanding jobs at the Bioscience Center of Kabi-Pharmacia, a Stockholm-based biotechnology company, while spending lots of time with their two small children—starting with 14 months at home, shared between the parents, after each child's birth. Helped by benefits like those, the Olssons have managed something many young scientists yearn for: having rewarding careers "without getting completely obsessed about work," as Olsson says.

When their first child was born, 3 years ago, they were both happily entrenched in challenging jobs. Lindner-Olsson, then 33, was leading a 12-person team developing industrial-scale mammalian cell culture methods, a program she had been recruited to start in 1985. Olsson, then 32, had finished a Ph.D. in engineering and had joined a team developing Pharmacia's prototype automated DNA sequencer for the market.

They wanted their child to have at least a year at home before starting day care, so they decided to take long leaves: 9 months for her, 5 for him. In Sweden, long leaves are common—particularly for mothers—since federal law grants new parents the right to 1 year of fully paid leave, which they can split however they choose (and to which they can add up to 6 months of unpaid leave).

Lindner-Olsson was initially concerned about being away from the lab for so long, but "it really went very smoothly," she says. A colleague took over her day-to-day work, and by keeping in close contact with co-workers she took part in important lab decisions. By the time their second child was born last summer, she was leading a second group but still decided to take an 8-month leave (her husband took 6 months).

Olsson's decisions were more novel than his wife's. While it's common for men in his company to take 2 or 3 months, his leaves were considered long, especially since, by the time their first child was born, he was leading his own group. Still, he says, while there were "a few raised eyebrows...when it came down to it, it was no big deal. And many people reacted very positively, especially younger men. They were glad to see that it could be done."

It helped, Olsson adds, that the work atmosphere is collegial and noncompetitive. Each group of 20 or so Ph.D. and graduate researchers has a head, but there is no hierarchy within the team. Another important factor, he says, is that "we're expanding, so there's room for everyone."

In spite of the welcoming climate in Sweden, not all obstacles to women have been breached, and Lindner-Olsson is one of the few top female managers in engineering. Asked what helped her beat the odds, she laughs and says, "You have to choose the right husband. Seriously, if you don't share [housework and child care], you can just forget it." Olsson insists he won't be an absentee father. "It's not only a matter of sharing the responsibility.... It's also a man's right to take care of his children. It's a matter of living a full life. Work isn't everything."

–Patricia Kahn

TOMAS SODERGREN/BLACK STAR

Leaning for support. Elisabeth Lindner-Olsson and Anders Olsson divide care of their two children, aided by Sweden's "family friendly" policies.

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Allaire for crisscrossing the country with the message that Xerox aims to be the employer of choice for technical women. "Culture is changed by people at the top," says Linda Brandt, chair of the women's council. "And our CEO is a very modern man."

But for each of these shining examples, there are many more that remain stuck at a one on the Schwartz scale—and a few who may even rate zeroes. And though some companies are trying hard to change, their efforts haven't yet made it possible for women to get to the corporate suites where they could begin to change policy themselves. At Du Pont, for example, only about 5% of top professionals and managers are women. In a 1992 Catalyst survey of 1000 companies, only 6% of members of boards of directors were women. Even at a company like Scios Nova—a model in some respects—only one of six top officers is a woman.

Scios Nova reflects its industry. Biotech has a healthy proportion of women working in the labs, but when the CEOs assemble, women are scarce: At the annual gathering of biotech chief executives in California last year, there were about 130 men—and three women, according to Kathleen Mullinix, CEO of Synaptic Pharmaceutical Corp. in Paramus, New Jersey, who was one of the three. One analysis of 35,000 high-tech companies, by CorpTech Inc. of Woburn, Massachusetts, found that fewer than 4% had female CEOs. Numbers for well-established older industries aren't readily available, but they're no doubt worse. Of course, universities don't offer women much more room at the top: Of all full professors in the United States in science and engineering in 1989, a mere 8% were female, according to the NRC.

The true bottom line for a woman with a Ph.D. who finds herself poised between industry and academics is that both sectors have a long way to go before they attain a "truly level playing field." But women evaluating the options available before the Schwartz ranking of five is achieved should keep in mind three factors that help determine where a company falls on the spectrum: numbers, age, and attitude.

–Elizabeth Culotta

AT&T BELL LABS

Women make up...

12 of 279
Ph.D.s in upper management (4%)

86 of 938
Ph.D.s (9%) (includes both researchers and management)