

Working with your Significant Other

My question is for those who (or have) worked with their S.O.s in their practice. What have been some key tips you could share to make things work as well as you hoped and avoid some of the "predictable" downfalls?

I *might* be having my Girlfriend of the past 3+ years come work as my assistant/secretary for part time this fall. Outside of Indy (Dr. Henry Jones, Jr., my 2 year old rescue mutt), it will be just the two people in the office.

What have people seen work and fail when working together?

I just have to respond to say that is one of the most awesome dogs' names ever.

Matthew J. Norris, California

Answering a question like this is much like any response you might make when your wife asks, "Does this dress make me look fat?"

Russ Carmichael

Personally, I would not work with a significant other or spouse. To me, that just seems like too much face-to-face time in a day. Some people are able to work with their spouses/partners and also see them at home (i.e. 24x7 exposure). I personally could not do that.

Also, I think there's a distinction between working *with* your spouse/partner and working *for* your spouse/partner (or having your spouse/partner work *for* you). If I hypothetically had to have my spouse/partner work for me, I would only have them do those tasks where they would have autonomy to do the task. I would consider filing documents with the court to be such a task. You could tell your spouse/partner that these 5 or 10 documents need to be filed with the court and here

is the e-filing website or court runner you normally use and just set your spouse/partner loose.

Contrast that with something like organizing or maintaining files within your office. You likely have particular quirks or idiosyncrasies about how you "like things done". Your spouse/partner would have much less autonomy compared to the filing documents with the court task so I think the potential for arguments and conflict is higher.

Working with your spouse is different in my mind because you can hopefully divvy up the tasks in such a way that you do certain things (e.g. working with software) that you excel at while she works on certain things (e.g. marketing, website design, etc) that she excels at. Your law practice needs both so the two of you can complement one another.

Andy I. Chen, California

My wife works part-time for me on an as-needed basis. Sometimes I lose out to the grandkids, but we haven't had issues.

Eric C. Davis, Alabama

To what Andy says, I think you need to be comfortable having your spouse around all the time. I work from home. For 12 of the last 15 years, my wife was a stay at home mom. We spent A LOT of time together. It was probably harder for me then for me. But, I never had her do work for me. That would have not worked in our marriage.

Jonathan Stein, California

I've worked with a spouse at an office supply company back in the 90's. He was in shipping, I was in sales. I was hired there first, & after I had been there a year (and a corporate move to a new location), the company needed a new shipping clerk, and he was hired.

At the onset, we sat down and agreed that we would not bring personal issues to work and would not bring work issues home. We also agreed that what happened at work was solely between 'shipping' and 'sales' not between husband and wife. Worked pretty well.

What we hadn't considered was what would happen if the company failed. It really sucked to have both of us out of work 3 years later when embezzlement by the owner's ex-husband forced the insolvency and closure of the business.

AnnMichelle G. Hart

My husband often spent lots of time at my office because I had the better printer. He was a free-lance writer, and when he had to crank out a script [back in the old days], he would use my "receptionist" desk printer - I never really had a receptionist - to print his scripts. But he also would hang at my office, and bring in lunch for both of us if we weren't going out, and when business was slow, we'd both sit companionably in the conference room, reading, talking, whatever. When I was really busy, he would help me with clerical work. But we got along really well in all areas, and worked well together, whether it was putting together furniture, packing and moving, shopping [not that either of us loved shopping], traveling, etc., so we could spend 24/7 together very easily. If there was ever conflict, which was rare, we were really good at talking it out. The only area in which he did not take direction well was when we first got a computer [1984] - I read the manuals, he didn't. So I learned how to use it and he was up all night kicking the PC table and cursing. I tried to help, but gave up and let him figure it out himself. Sometimes, he asked me for help. Mostly, I kept hands off.

I think all those things are important. And you can't really have hierarchy/ power dynamics going on for the relationship to work out or survive the work relationship. That's my 2 cents. YMMV.

Miriam N. Jacobson, Pennsylvania

My dad worked for my mom for a while. What Andy said is right - there's a difference between working "with" and working "for" your spouse or significant other.

1 - Know your style as a boss. Do you micromanage? Do you give broad authority to complete a task? Do you get easily annoyed? Do you raise your voice?

2 - Know her style as a worker. Does she like to listen to music while she works? Does she get distracted easily? Is she going to ask the right sorts of questions?

3 - Define your expectations. Is she going to do certain tasks and show up every week? Is she the one in charge of picking her hours or are you?

4 - Pay. How much, how often, and through what payroll company? Get it in writing.

My dad had no problem with my mom being in charge, but he did have a stubborn streak and could be lazy. Him working as her assistant gave him more flexibility to run us kids to and from school and handle extracurriculars, which in the 90s wasn't always available to employees.

My hubby has occasionally assisted me, but that's usually with prepping my (now very very old) website, stuffing envelopes, or shredding. Discrete tasks, with broad discretion, are what works for us.

Corrine Bielejeski, California

Thanks everyone for the inputs.

As I have gone through a dozen assistants in ten years, I **think** I have a good idea of what kind of manager I am. Unfortunately, I am the type that often expects my assistants to read my mind and fill in the various gaps in my scribbled notes or directives. But I am working on that.

Because my SO will be working **for me** and not **with me** in a role that is well documented with identification of tasks, etc., I hope that some of the confusions might not occur, but I am sure there will be a few bumps.

While I could look to bring someone with more legal experience into my office, I have gone through too many short-term placements where I lose a week of work training, and then re-training, correcting etc. Anyone that works for me part-time ends up moving to a full position with benefits, etc., that I cannot compete with. My SO isn't interested in a career in the legal field, but with all of our kids getting to an age where they are getting more self-reliant, there isn't as much need for her to be at home for the kids 24x7 and is looking to do something. Given I can offer the

flexibility for her to take care of the kiddos and other life junk, it works out well for both of us.

Andrew Winghart, California

We very successfully did the same. I have been a true solo since 1984. I had a wonderful secretary/legal assistant for several years. And then another. And then another. And then about 10 years down the road I reached a period where one hire after another lasted from a few hours to a few days. My wife jumped in. There was an accommodation, and like Andrew says, she was not looking for a career in the legal world. But the one thing she had and expressed, unlike ANY of the others, was a vested interest in everything she did, including doing it "right," client service, etc. That proved invaluable. And the lack of legal training meant she questioned everything the first time. She would proofread and ask, what does this or that mean. That made me think, often change the wording of forms, etc. Mantra was and still is, if she could not understand what I wrote, I failed to communicate. Of course there were occasional issues, but all resolved, all workable, etc. The flexibility was wonderful for both of us. And when I moved my office home about 20 years ago, that meant no need to hire anyone from outside to come into our home. From the beginning, we both knew who had to make the decisions, but she was never afraid to question anything. With hindsight, it would not have worked had we been on an equal educational footing. I am sure it would not work for everyone, but it worked great for us for the 25+ years.

Henry R. Reckler, Colorado

How is your SO at reading your mind? :-)

You might want to have a written contract, just to spell out the work relationship.

Miriam N. Jacobson

Like any good SO, she can read my mind before I can and if I read my own mind incorrectly, she tells me so.

Drew Winghart

If you are serious, I could not disagree more strongly. It is the vested interest, without an employee sense of here is what I am expected to do per my contract, that makes it work. If that is not present, there would be serious risk to the marriage.

Henry R. Reckler

Don't worry, I was absolutely joking.

Drew Winghart
