

Spouse effects in the workplace

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The idea of employing a married couple sounds superficially attractive. It suggests emotional stability, regular habits and the likelihood of long, trouble-free service. Owners of big houses have always seen the benefits of a live-in couple for domestic work. Small shops are often run efficiently by couples. But the impact of a husband and wife working together in corporate industry can be challenging.

It immediately imposes an extra layer of complexity on everyday working relationships. Your dialogue with one half of the couple partly involves the other, as they will naturally confide in each other. If the two of them have had a disagreement at home, it may spill over into office work. If an argument turns nasty, you can be told, "Be careful, that's my wife you're talking to." Office feuds start to take on a family dimension and can start to feel like gang warfare.

That, of course, is quite apart from the vexed issue of sexual attraction and flirtation in the office. It is reasonable to claim that this is mostly harmless and perhaps good for self-esteem - a little compliment here, perhaps a surprise birthday-card there - and that the presence of the spouse may heighten the tension unnecessarily and set off bad feelings.

I knew a case where a dominant wife arranged for her husband to be employed in the same department, purely because she wanted to keep him under inspection. Everybody noticed the husband's discomfort, and felt sorry for him in his undignified position.

Personally, I feel that the workplace should not be an extension of home; the two environments have separate functions, and each should make a refreshing change from the other.

I knew one married couple who ran a successful business from home, but they did find that being alone together 24/7, all year, was a somewhat unnatural arrangement, and they made it their policy to take separate holidays. He confided to me he was quite a possessive husband who did not feel comfortable with his wife abroad with a lively young group. But he was professional enough to acknowledge the need for it.

Maybe my experiences have been untypical, but I've only known one case where the employment of a married couple has been actively beneficial, and it was in a highly specialised context. The two were working together in a biochemical laboratory where he was head of research and she was the radiologist - a partnership that required not only team effort but a special rapport, rather like a sort of marriage.

But on the whole, I feel that it's better not to invite the problems of spouses into the office.

Nevertheless, there are many married couples in business, in companies and also in the British parliament - and they are mostly successful.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.