

What Does It Take to Make a Marriage and Business Partnership Work?

By Heather Hudson (<https://www.freshbooks.com/blog/author/heather-hudson>) on October 25, 2016



When business partners Rachel Segal and Scott Harmer need to hash out a plan for scheduling important project work, it's not in their company's boardroom. The married owners of a web design and development business (<http://www.rachelsegal.com/>) partnership might meet briefly between chores on the small farm they own on Quadra Island, off the eastern coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Occasionally, they'll both be in the office space they rent in a town nearby. But mostly they take advantage of any quiet moment they can.

"It's usually in the middle of the night, whispering over sleeping babies when we sort out our schedule," Segal confesses.

Parents of a two-and-a-half year-old and a 10-month-old, Segal and Harmer are in the thick of juggling marriage, business and family. It's a tough negotiation.

"It feels a lot like triage. When I need a couple of hours to take phone calls, send emails, etc., I'll go to the office. Then we'll switch off and he'll go there for longer stretches to code and design," says Segal.

While Segal and Harmer might have an unusual living arrangement, their holistic approach to balancing marriage and business is not uncommon. Indeed, one of the double-edged swords of being in business with your partner is that the lines between professional and personal lives are forever blurred.

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Veteran married entrepreneurs Alex Wigington and Marawan El-Asfahani can attest to that. They were in business together for 17 years as partners of the award-winning Oxygen Design Agency (<http://oxygen.ca/>). Alex says they ran their business 24/7 for many years.

“There’s a lot of confiding in each other and decompressing after hours. The dining room table is the boardroom because you didn’t get a chance to talk about a lot of things during the day,” said Wigington.

With non-stop work and life happening in all directions and at all times, how do marriages and businesses stay intact? We asked Wigington and Segal to share their strategies to keep love and business alive as married entrepreneurs.

Divide and Conquer Your Business Partnership: Capitalizing on Different Skill Sets

When they began dating, Alex Wigington and Marawan El-Asfahani were on different career tracks. She was a graphic designer who worked independently; he was a corporate salesperson in the hospitality industry. But when Wigington considered hiring another designer to help her with an overwhelming workload, El-Asfahani had another idea. “He suggested we go into business together.”

Not daunted by the fact that he didn’t have a lick of training or experience in design, El-Asfahani thrived on the challenge of drumming up sales and keeping close track of their financial goals and how to reach them.

“I had to teach him [about design]. He watched and learned all the terminology. I would go to meetings with him and tell him ‘this is what I think we should do’ and he would help me draft estimates,” said Wigington.

While Wigington quietly applied her creative talent to the projects that were coming in, El-Asfahani worked his connections in hospitality and tourism for bigger and better ones. His persistence paid off when he brought home Nike as a client in the first few months. “He’s a people and connections person and that’s the skill he brought to the table,” said Wigington. “Every designer or design firm wants and has a hard time finding someone who can sell and speak design. Marawan did that for us.”

Playing to their individual strengths is a strategy Segal and Harmer employ as well. Segal says their skills complement one another to make for successful project deployments.

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“We get each other and are both sensitive to the nuances of what a graphic designer needs and what a digital strategist needs to be successful,” said Segal. “Sometimes we work separately and sometimes our work dovetails and goes together really well.”

The power of opposites is also beneficial for the tedious tasks they hate to do. “I can fumble my way through rudimentary website coding, but I’d rather not. Scott’s terrible on the administrative front, so it’s my responsibility to make sure we get paid,” she laughs.

Compatibility and Communication Key to Business Partnership

Compatibility is key to the success of a love and business partnership, says Wigington. In their case, the business came before the marriage, so they had some insight into whether they could go all in on their partnership.

“Marawan and I can spend a lot of time together and not annoy each other... We’re both hard working people and can work long hours and not get crazy. That’s important when starting a business—you have to work hard and you get tired and it’s stressful. It’s helpful to have two people who can cope with that and not take it out on each other.”

Segal says the last five years of extreme upheaval—two babies, a business and building a homestead in the middle of nowhere—confirms that compatibility and communication can get them through just about anything.



***Rachel Segal and Scott Harmer pictured with their daughter Isla and baby Max.
Credit: Blue Tree Photography***

“Our mostly stressful parts have been too much work imposing into too much life. When you throw kids into the mix, it can sometimes be a battle to see who’s poutier about being more tired. It’s not good for work or the relationship.”

When things get heated, they’ll often take a time out and revisit an issue when things have cooled down. “It’s really about figuring out what the root of the problem is and addressing it.”

“Communicating through easy times and difficult conversations is the most important thing.”

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Have Each Other’s Back

For Wigington, one of the best aspects of running a business with her husband was working toward a shared passion together.

“From couple’s perspective, you have to remember that there’s no better partner because you have the same goal. You’re [working with someone] you can depend on, who won’t walk away... you know they have your back. That’s one of the greatest gifts you can get.”

Conversely, when the business is going through a challenging time, it’s not an option to resign and find a new job. “You have to agree that ‘this is hard and we’re going through a demanding time, but we have to stick together’. That’s our thing: we have to stick together,” said Wigington.

Segal stresses that regularly acknowledgement of what your partner brings to the business is key to maintaining positive feelings all around. “Both of us are really good about making sure that we take the time to say thank you and express appreciation for each other’s strengths. We can read each other well and know what the other needs.”

Even though she and Harmer have a different outlook on projects, their knowledge of one another means it’s easier and more intuitive to make decisions than with business associates. Plus, it’s pretty awesome to share the highs with the one you love. “When a project goes off to a client and they totally love it, we feel an added sense of pride. It’s one thing when it’s your team and another when it’s the person you’re together with. It’s definitely more fun.”

Shift Gears When It’s Family Time

When you’re “covered in babies” it can be tricky to get down to business. Segal says regular childcare, flexibility and the ability to switch gears quickly are everything when raising a family and running a company. Controlled chaos is the expectation and helps put projects, schedules and opportunities in perspective.

Wigington can relate. She and El-Asfahani planned ahead when they decided to start a family, making one of their designers an associate to pinch hit so Wigington could take a maternity leave. “If you’re a married couple planning on having children, you’re going to want to have a second ‘you’ that can cover for you.”

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However, as her children progressed through elementary school, the long hours caught up to her. “The business was doing really well, we were increasing revenue every year, but for about four years I started feeling like it was really hard with the kids,” said Wigington.

“I felt like I didn’t know where we were going to go from there except continued stress, the kids needed more time from us, I was tired of coming home at 7 o’clock at night and I started craving doing something else creatively.”

Ultimately, Wigington exited Oxygen and went into business renovating homes with her brother. “Marawan wasn’t very happy when I wanted to leave the business but in the end it created a new opportunity for him. He ended up merging with two other firms, one in industrial design and the other almost identical to Oxygen. The three companies came together to create a 22-person business, Jackknife Design (<http://jackknifedesign.com/>) and it’s one of the best design companies in the business today.”

Take Time Out for Marriage

Perhaps the most important tip Segal and Wigington offer is to take time away from work as a couple. While Wigington and El-Asfahani made a point to transport themselves from their home and office for weekends away, Segal and Harmer keep it simple and occasionally use their child care to grab a coffee together in town.

“Sometimes instead of running to the office right away we’ll make space to spend a bit of time together, just us. We both know it’s important for our sanity to connect outside of work as much as possible.”



About the Author: Heather Hudson is an accomplished freelance writer and journalist based in Toronto. She writes for a number of publishing, corporate and agency clients who depend on her to deliver high-quality, on-brand content and journalism with a fresh perspective. Learn more about her work at heatherhudson.ca (<http://heatherhudson.ca/>).

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