



By: Brocha Miller

Mixing Business with Family: Does it Work?

In most working situations, there will always be some conflict between home and the office. "My boss wants me to stay late on Tuesdays." "My wife wants to go Florida for the week." Juggling responsibilities and conflicts are part of the regular routine.

But what happens when the home and office are combined, and family members work together? Does that

make the decisions and conflicts easier to deal with - or more difficult?

Does the family that works together become closer together, or does it drive them further apart?

The family is a natural team, and for some it makes sense to carry that teamwork over into the workplace. Most people we interviewed work with family members out of

convenience and flexibility. Since many When a young person opens a business without much capital to invest, the likely step would be for his wife to act as his secretary. Or for him to turn to a relative for assistance in finding a job. For the boss, trust is a key element. When hiring a relative, you know what to expect and there's a certain level of comfort.

Shimon and Kaila are married for seven years, and have been working together for a number of years.

Kaila enjoys working with her husband, and she says she feels she can be more of a help to him this way. "I understand the bigger picture. Because I work with him, I know what's going on in the business, and we can talk about it, I can advise him." She smiles, "You

know, I'm going to have to listen to him talk about work anyway, I may as well know what's going on."

Kaila can't deny the practical advantages too. She brings her baby to work, and if she ever has to take off for doctor's appointments, her boss is very understanding.

Shimon also appreciates the special services he wouldn't get from a standard employee. "She brings me breakfast and lunch," he says as he munches on a rice cake. "You can't beat that! But seriously, it helps that she's always available for me too. For example, last night I was at the office until 10:00 at night trying to clarify an issue regarding a payment. I was able to call my wife and ask her about it, she's always there for me."

Yehuda and Faigy are another couple that worked together in the service industry. After two years of *kollel*, Yehuda started a part time service business from their home, which developed into an enterprise with five employees working from a warehouse.

Faigy says when her husband hired a secretary, she gave a huge sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad I don't work for him anymore."

What was so difficult about working together?

"I tried to be careful about the details of my job, but if anything went wrong, I felt horrible. Not only did I mess up, but I messed something up for my husband's work too, and I felt doubly bad. For example, I was taking care of a very elaborate order for a big customer. And I missed a text that they had changed the quantity from 100 to 85. We ordered the extra stock, which was very expensive and we didn't use it. It was a huge order, and the customer was very demanding, then in the end we didn't even make a profit. I felt so awful, like it was such an easy thing for me to do, and I messed up. I cried the whole morning."

And how did her husband react?

"He was really understanding; he wrote me a whole poem. And I know everyone makes mistakes,

but I still felt really bad."

In trying to find a bright side to this situation, I ask Faigy, "Didn't you enjoy spending time together?"

"Well, sure we were always together. But our time spent together was busy talking about the business, instead of the things a husband and wife should be discussing." She pauses to consider.

"OK, he was very understanding about my hours, he was very flexible. If the baby kept me up at night, I could work a shorter day. But I still think it's not worth it, and I would definitely advise against couples working together."

Avi and Leah have a similar issue. They are a husband and wife team who worked together to build up a successful business in their basement.

"The main downside is that our work is 24/7. My wife works until 2:00, and then she picks up the kids from playgroup. We don't discuss business in front of the kids, but other than that, the whole evening and weekends are usually spent talking about work, it's hard to get away."

"The truth is this is not my dream job," Avi says. "But it works for us, and the *parsassah* is good, so I can't complain. And really, I'm more serious and my wife is more easygoing, so we balance each other out."

Meir has been working with his brother for almost five years, and he loves it.

Meir describes his job as "President of Schlepping."

"I spend a lot of time with deliveries and setting up the merchandise, it's a lot of physical labor. But I love working with family. We were always very close, and it's amazing to work with someone who you really care about. I also think I'm a better worker because the boss is my brother. I care about him being successful, so I'll go beyond the call of duty."

But Meir admits that there are drawbacks,

"Money is tricky, because you want to do what's in your own best interest, but it's sensitive because

it's family. If I feel like I deserve a raise, or a certain benefit, I'll be more hesitant to ask for it, than if I had a regular employer."

Do they ever argue about money?

"No, we never got into a fight. I know that he's the boss, and I realize he's in charge. He's also more sensitive to my needs. We work very hard to make it work. We don't fight."

Breindy is a young wife and mother who was in the family business from the beginning.

"My grandfather owns the company, my parents and my uncles all work for him, so I'm used to it. I do bookkeeping for my father, and it works out great. I work in the mornings, but if I need to take off or the kids are sick, it's OK."

Breindy admits there are some negative aspects, "You do get sick of people, if you're always working with your family. Also, I sometimes feel taken advantage of. If another employee would put in more effort for something, they would get a bonus. But I feel like I'm taken for granted, and I'm supposed to go the extra mile. Sometimes I think my extra work isn't appreciated."

Do the advantages outweigh the negatives?

"Definitely." Breindy assures me.

"What about co-workers?" I ask her, "Is it uncomfortable for them, to be working with the bosses' daughter?"

"I'm sure they're more careful what they say around me. Maybe I save them from speaking *lashon hora!* But really, I'm in my own office, so if they don't come in to me, I won't hear what they're saying.

"With the vendors, I don't like them to know I'm the bosses daughter. I don't boast about it, I'll say ask Mr. Cohen to sign the check, not my father will sign it. I like to keep it quiet, it sounds more professional."

Sara Leah tells the other side of the story. "For a short time I worked in a family-run community organization. The boss was the father, the eldest daughter was my supervisor, and the mother ran the office.

It was fine at first, but in any

working situations, there will always be little clashes or disagreements, in the way things should be run, or how much money to spend on a certain project. I found it uncomfortable to deal with, because I felt there was no one to talk to. The family kept a very united front, and they would never disagree with each other- at least not in front of me! It's nice that they showed such unity, but sometimes my opinion also had to be heard! I ended up leaving that job for other reasons, but I would not want to be in that situation again!"

Working with family members can bring out the best, the dedication, trust and open communication. Or the worst of sensitivities, family politics, and arguments. If your job does involve family members, here are some ideas on how to make it work.

At Home

Set boundaries, to only discuss business at a certain time. Don't allow the workplace to take over your home life.

Set limits, don't allow your workplace persona to extend into the home. If at work you are the boss, remember at home you are the father, or uncle, etc. and do not treat family member likes employees outside of the office.

At Work:

Set roles, make sure the jobs are carefully described and clear to each person, so there is no confusion about who is responsible for what.

Set up communication, there should be a process for making decisions, who is involved and at what point. This ensures that no one is left out of the loop, or that inappropriate people are part of the process, just because they are related.

Set up an evaluation system, there should be an objective way to assess all employees, so that promotions and pay raises are merit based.

* All names and identifying details have been changed.