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And your better half makes three

It's not just employer and employee: A spouse can have a powerful influence on a partner's job and career choices, experts say

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As manager of human resources for a Vancouver forestry company, Shawn Jensen often felt torn between management and employees. At the end of the day, he'd return home and tell his wife about his problems at work.

"Like a lot of people, I tended not to reveal too much emotion at work," Mr. Jensen says. "Then I'd come home and be upset."

But while Mr. Jensen just wanted to vent the feelings he kept hidden at work, his wife, Lorraine, would often push him to "do something about it." Then they'd end up either arguing or spending the next few hours feeling resentful toward each other.

"I'd be telling him: 'You get back to work and you tell them to give you more money,'" recalls Ms. Jensen, who lives on Vancouver Island with her husband. "And he would resist that."

Every day you go to work, you figure you're leaving your family behind. But, according to workplace and relationship experts, the employer-employee relationship often becomes a ménage à trois when the employee is married or seriously involved.

That's because many Canadians' significant others like to have a say in their spouse's career. And whether or not their opinions are welcome, they can have a powerful effect on their other half's career performance, direction and decisions, experts say.

"There's no doubt about it, our spouses or partners have an influence on our jobs and career choices," says Lynne O'Connor, a human resources consultant and president of Advanced Career Coaching Inc. in Toronto. "And vice versa - our jobs and career choices have a direct impact on our personal relationships."

How much do spouses count? Forty-two per cent of 8,207 respondents to a Globe and Mail website poll said their spouses or significant others have "a lot" of influence on their career decisions; another 27 per cent said some influence and 13 per cent said a bit. Just 19 per cent said they had no influence.

A recent study by online recruiter <http://www.jobsite.co.uk> found that 80 per cent of British couples said they argued at least once a month about work. About one-third of them said these arguments caused them to make

changes in their working lives, including even switching jobs.

What were these couples fighting about? Men were primarily concerned about their partners being taken advantage of in the workplace, as well as being underpaid. Women, on the other hand, tended to be more concerned about their partner being unhappy or stressed because of work.

Regardless of gender, more than one-third of respondents said they pestered their partners about work because they wanted to spend more time enjoying their relationship.

Ms. O'Connor says that the considerable influence spouses have on employees' careers should come as no surprise to employers.

After all, most couples use each other as a sounding board for everything from what shoes to wear to what kind of car to buy. So why wouldn't they do the same with career-related matters, Ms. O'Connor asks.

"There's an agreement between most couples that they're a team, a partnership, so it becomes a given that if you're being offered a new job or a promotion, you don't make a move without talking to your partner first," she says. "And if you're dealing with upsetting issues at work, you're also likely to talk to your spouse about it."

Matthew Turvey, a director with Life Innovations Inc., a Minneapolis-based organization that trains marriage counsellors and sells self-help marriage improvement products, says employers need to start paying attention to their employees' better halves, and recognize the clout they wield.

"A lot of companies today recognize the importance of work-life balance, and, as part of this, they need to do more than support their employee. "They also need to reach out to employees' spouses and find ways to support them and make them feel like they're part of the company," Mr. Turvey says.

Vlasta Dusil, Vancouver-based human resources director for Business Objects Corp., a business intelligence software provider with headquarters in San Jose, Calif., and in Paris, says employers that want to attract and retain talented employees need to earn the approval and loyalty of these workers' spouses.

Business Objects does this in a number of ways, Ms. Dusil says, starting with inviting spouses to social events, such as summer barbecues, soccer games, and Christmas parties.

"The value of these types of activities is that they allow the spouses to get to know the people within Business Objects, and then we're no longer the faceless company that takes their husband or wife away from them."

Once a year, Business Objects requires its sales people to attend an out-of-town conference for a couple of days. During this time, the company sends the spouses back home pizza gift certificates or gift cards to cover the cost of a family meal. "We will also frequently tell employees [who have been working a lot of long hours] to take their spouse out to dinner and expense it," Ms. Dusil says.

Ms. Dusil says it isn't just about staff retention, it's also about selling the company as a prospective workplace for the spouse. "In fact, we've had a number of cases where the spouse of an employee eventually joined us."

Stephen Bartolini, president of the International Academy of Design and Technology in Toronto, also sees the importance of bringing spouses into the workplace circle.

Many of the academy's employees put in a lot of extra hours throughout the year, leaving spouses to take care of things at home, Mr. Bartolini says. To show appreciation, Mr. Bartolini says the school organizes a one-day boat cruise each year for all employees and their significant others. "The cruise is our way of saying thank you for being so supportive of your partner's work."

To make spouses also feel like part of their partners' work world, the school also encourages employees to recruit the wife and kids as volunteers during school events, like open houses and fashion shows.

Today, the Jensens work together - not for an employer but as a duo of relationship coaches. Their company, Olive Juice Forever, hosts corporate workshops that teach managers and employees how to improve workplace relationships by communicating better.

As part of these workshops, the Jensens also talk about the impact that relationships between spouses can have on workplace productivity and safety. Employees are more productive when they're happy in their spousal relationships, Ms. Jensen says.

They're also less likely to be absent-minded and error-prone on the job when they're not distracted by worries about upset spouses because they're working late again or have to leave for another business trip, she adds.

Mr. Jensen says many of the managers and employees who attend Olive Juice Forever workshops get especially enthusiastic when he and Ms. Jensen get to the part about how spousal relationships can affect the workplace.

"They relate to what we're talking about because most of them have had work-related disagreements with their spouses at some point in the relationship," Mr. Jensen says. "And yes, some of them will admit that these disagreements have had a negative impact on their [work] productivity."

To help employees address work-related problems at home, the Jensens teach workshop participants how to communicate better with their significant others. For instance, even when they have problems at work, most people don't like having their jobs criticized, Ms. Jensen says. So part of what they teach is how employees can avoid being defensive when their spouses complain about their work and instead focus on finding solutions.

"For example, instead of saying: 'There's nothing I can do about it - my job requires me to work late,' ask your spouse what it is you can do to help her cope with you working late," Ms. Jensen says. "Sometimes, the solution can be as simple as hiring a babysitter to help her out on those evenings when you're at work."

Employers are slowly but surely realizing that employees who are happy in their spousal relationships are also happy - and productive - at work, says Ms. Jensen. Some companies are even doing their bit to help keep these relationships going strong by running "marriage training" programs, she says.

One such company, Atlanta-based CFA Properties Inc., which owns the Chick-fil-A restaurant franchise, hosts lunchtime marriage training sessions and retreats. It recently opened a retreat centre where managers and their spouses can stay for a few days of marriage training.

Ms. Jensen says she's aware some people may wonder if employers are crossing the line by offering such programs."Some people may ask: Are employees' personal relationships really any of their employers' business?" she asks. "We believe the answer is yes. As the boss, it is their business because a happy employee produces better and more results."But more importantly, as employers, companies have a moral and social responsibility to look after their employees, and this is one more way of doing that."

Spousal smarts: Have a say, but don't overstep boundaries

Encourage, but don't push. No one likes being told what to do, even when the person doing the telling is a well-meaning spouse. And when people are already feeling stressed at work, the last thing they need is a spouse telling them to do something about it or get another job. "This also becomes stressful for the person who's pushing, because, eventually, she'll start to feel frustrated by her spouse's failure to act," says Vancouver relationship coach Lorraine Jensen. The best thing to do? "Just listen, and encourage your partner to come up with his own solutions."

Understand your motivation. There may be more to a spouse's unhappiness than what's on the surface.

For instance, a spouse who seems upset because his newly promoted wife is suddenly working long hours may actually be feeling jealous because his own career has stalled, says Vancouver psychologist and marriage counsellor Geoffrey Carr. “Find out what’s really going on underneath, because the person who needs to make a change may be you and not your spouse.”

Make friends with the enemy. Some people may see their spouse’s employer as a rival infringing on their time together. Others may feel left out because a spouse has formed strong bonds with co-workers. Stephen Bartolini, president of the International Academy of Design and Technology in Toronto, encourages employees’ spouses to meet their partners’ colleagues. “It’s good to put a face on the names you hear so much about at home,” he says. “Then they become less threatening because, suddenly, they’re real people, and you might even like them.”

Keep your eye on the prize. Sometimes couples agree to make sacrifices so they can meet certain goals. For instance, they may agree to relocate temporarily because one of them landed a major contract in another city. But Ms. Jensen says even when couples agree in advance to such arrangements, there may be moments when one may feel resentful about being asked to make a sacrifice for their spouse’s career. “Instead of picking a fight, remind yourself that, hey, you were part of this decision,” she says. “Then try to stay focused on the goals that you and spouse had set when you first agreed to this plan.”

Don’t fight your spouse’s battles. No matter how badly you want to help your partner, resist the urge to fire off an angry e-mail to the co-worker who stole his idea or to the boss who was too stingy to give your hard-working spouse a raise, says Lynne O’Conner, a human resource consultant and president of Advanced Career Coaching Inc. “It’s understandable to feel so angry on behalf of your spouse because you see that he’s stressed out at work or he’s not being treated fairly,” she says. “Even then, it’s not a good idea to try to fix things for him by calling his boss - you’ll be overstepping boundaries and, in the process, making your partner look like he can’t stand up for himself.”

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