

Working at Home, and Not Alone

Many Couples Use Separate Spaces And Basic Rules

By Dan Rafter
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Mark Sincevich and Linda Petursdottir admit that it took some getting used to.

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Sincevich had run his photography business from his home in Chevy Chase since late 2001. A year ago, Petursdottir, his wife, a holistic health counselor, began running her business from their home, too.

That changed everything. Petursdottir left piles of paper throughout the house. Her business calls distracted Sincevich. Both spouses were guilty of interrupting each other during work.

"It was a longer adjustment period at first," Sincevich said. "I wasn't used to working with anyone in the same office with me. After Linda started working from home, there were piles of paper everywhere, and we were running out of storage room. She actually had three areas of the home where she was working. I was overwhelmed."

The couple knew they had to make changes. Petursdottir stopped scattering her work around the house, and now stows away her papers and files at the end of the work day. When either spouse receives a personal call, he or she leaves the office. The two have learned that when one is working, the other should not pester with questions about dinner plans.

They also constantly remind themselves how lucky they are to both have the opportunity to work from home.

About 4.2 million U.S. residents over age 16 log a significant portion of the work hours at home, the Census Bureau estimated in 2000. There are no statistics, though, on how many couples in the country are like Sincevich and Petursdottir -- life partners who both work from their homes at the same time.

Such couples face special challenges. It's often difficult for anyone who works from home to shut off the workday and slip into personal time. This is doubly difficult when two people work from home at the same time. People who are used to bouncing ideas off each other may fall into the habit of constantly interrupting each other.

Then there's the closeness issue: It's not always easy working when your husband or wife is sitting three feet away.

The work-from-home couples who are thriving have managed to avoid these pitfalls and have embraced the uniqueness of their work situation.

Imal Wagner, a publicist, and her husband, Marcus, vice president of a small Virginia telecom company, have both worked from their Gaithersburg home for 3 1/2 years.

At first, the couple operated from offices on the same floor of their three-story house. This didn't work. Imal works early in the morning and late in the evening. Marcus prefers more traditional business hours. Imal receives loads of phone calls, sometimes at strange hours. Both had the habit of offering the other advice when advice wasn't sought.

The couple quickly solved the problem. Imal now works on the ground floor of the house, while Marcus works from the basement.

"It's better to have your exclusive territory, a place to have your activities and successes separately," Imal said. "We can discuss things with each other when it helps us, but that's not something that happens automatically. Marcus needs more quiet than I need. I am interacting personally with the media all day and he'll need to be working on contracts. Then that could flip, and he'll be talking with clients and I'll be working online to set up schedules."

One of the most serious challenges those who work from home face is knowing when to end the workday. And when two people work from home at the same time, there are two people struggling with this problem.

Ken and Patti Giglio both work for the business Patti founded eight years ago, PSG Communications. Patti admits it's harder for her to end the workday than it is for her husband. That's to be expected: Patti founded the business in her Silver Spring home. Ken is a relative newcomer to it, joining the business recently after a career with Associated Press.

But the two work around Patti's frequently odd business hours. Like many work-from-home spouses, the Giglios don't have a strict division of labor around the house. Whatever needs to be done -- whether it's paying bills, driving their 13- and 10-year-old boys to soccer practice or starting dinner -- is handled by whichever spouse is free.

This, the Giglios say, is the perfect illustration of the main benefit of their work situation: flexibility.

Ken said, "We can take time out to go to the gym in the middle of the day. We can sit around and wait for the plumber without having to take time off work. . . . It's quite a wonderful benefit."

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