

STARTING OUT: Getting Your ‘Significant Other’ Onboard

Feb 2002 SHRM Online Interview with Linda Plummer conducted by: Lin Gensing-Pophal

You’ve been thinking about it for a long time and can no longer contain your excitement and enthusiasm about leaving the world of 9 to 5 and striking out on your own. You eagerly share your plan with your significant other, but instead of the shared excitement and expression of support you’d anticipated, your announcement is met with shock, bewilderment, even anger.

What gives? Why doesn’t your significant other share your enthusiasm, and how can you generate the support you need to live your dream?

For wanna-be consultants in committed relationships, gaining your partner’s support is a critical step in making the move from a secure full-time job to the risky business of consulting, says independent consultant Linda Plummer.

Plummer had worked for AT&T for 20 years when she decided she wanted more flexibility to accommodate her first-graders schedule. Her husband, who also worked at AT&T, was hesitant to give up her steady salary. But he agreed to give her six months to try her hand at consulting. If it didn’t work, she’d seek a full-time job.

Plummer was successful in her consulting endeavors and her husband, also interested in more flexibility, was able to join her in the business. Today, their first-grader is a college freshman and they’ve been consulting successfully for 10 years.

I’m envious of my colleagues whose partners become part of the business, says Nan Andrews Amish, a management consultant and business coach. The alignment of purpose in these arrangements is powerful.

Whether your partner plans or hopes to join you at some point, or you anticipate that you’ll be the sole practitioner in your firm, making that first step requires the full support and commitment from the person you’ll leave behind in the corporate world. How can you engender that support with the least amount of angst and stress on your relationship?

Have a Plan

Before broaching the idea with your significant other, have a plan. This, of course, is a critical step even if you’re entirely on your own. A business plan ensures that this important move has been well thought out. Not only should you have a plan, you should be willing to *share* your plan.

Show your partner your projections, advises Plummer. These are the leads I have. These are my sources for networking. I’ve done my homework. I’ve talked with other people in consulting.

Liz Folger is a work-at-home expert and the author of *The Stay-at-Home Moms Guide to Making Money from Home* (Three Rivers Press, 2000). Financial concerns are definitely one of the key issues involved in making a decision to trade a steady paycheck for the uncertainty of a consulting career, Folger agrees. The idea of one of you staying home and starting a

business which may or may not make money any time soon is enough to turn anyone white with fear.

Lining up some solid prospects, and preferably at least one committed client, can help you ease the fears and anxieties of your partner.

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When anyone becomes self-employed, the spouse and family are impacted. If the consultant leaves with a solid client typically the past employer the financial stress is less, says Amish. Usually the toughest issues include the decreased predictability of income, the initial drop in absolute income and the fact that the home becomes the work base.

Make Your Pitch

If I were coaching somebody, I would first encourage them to think about their partner's perspective, says Plummer. Part of it, of course, is that they love you and they want you to be happy. Share with them that "This is my dream, I'd really like to try this and I'd like to have your support".

But Plummer acknowledges that this may not be enough to convince your significant other that a risky move is the right thing for both of you. More practical considerations along the lines of "What's in it for me?" can help you show how this dream of yours may benefit both of you.

Domestic concerns. For example, when Plummer convinced her husband to give her a six-month trial at working as an independent consultant, some of the benefits she pointed out included the ability for her to be more involved with their daughter and her school activities, and additional flexibility for taking care of household issues like dealing with repairs, deliveries, etc. And, since she would be at home during the day, she agreed to take care of the home-cooked meals.

You can go too far with that, she acknowledges. But, while you don't want to suddenly take on all the responsibility for the home chores you are, after all, still working at what may now be much more than a full time job working at home can still allow for taking on *some* of these tasks.

Money matters. I would advise a person to think in terms of the benefit to their husband, wife or partner, says Plummer. Think of it in terms of trying to relieve their worries. Show financially how you can manage on just one salary.

Plummer, for example, agreed not to buy any new clothes and not to cut into their personal savings. Her husband agreed to refinance and extend the mortgage to lower the payments and to put off major expenses like a new car or vacation for a while.

Identify 'Boundaries'

After Plummer's husband joined her practice, for a time they shared a work area a challenge given their distinct work preferences. Plummer preferred a quiet environment where she could concentrate on her projects. Her husband liked more interaction. In consulting, you have to focus on what you're doing. I would go nuts when he would interrupt me. I'd have to say get out of here; I have to think about this! Don't interrupt me. It's hard to share an office, she acknowledges.

Since their daughter left for college, she was able to convince her husband to move into his own office a move he agreed to, but hesitantly. He would have been happy to be in here with me, Plummer says.

With more privacy, Plummer has established some boundaries. When I'm in this room and I shut this door, that means I'm not available, she says. It's worked out well for us. He's been nice to work with, but we have different styles.

Even if you're working home alone, it's important to establish boundaries and manage your partners expectations up front. For instance:

- Set limits on the type, amount and timing of those domestic activities you'll agree to take on.
- Make it clear in your approach to your consulting business that it *is* a business and not a hobby you work on when you're not doing laundry, housecleaning or cooking.
- Establish work hours and times when you're not to be interrupted.

These issues and conflicts can be tough and often emotionally charged, but should be anticipated and addressed openly and immediately.

Emotionally, it takes focus to have a new business or consultancy take off, says Amish. But, she adds, the rewards can be substantial.

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