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BUSINESS

Would You Hire Your Husband?

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NINE years ago, Laura Udall noticed that her young daughter Rachel suffered back pain from lugging her books back and forth to school. Ms. Udall, a former saleswoman at [AT&T](#), decided to develop and market a backpack light enough for children to wear safely.

Sharon DiMinico leads a staff meeting at her company, Learning Express, based in Devens, Mass. Her husband, Lou, second from left, began working for the company in the late 1980s.



Robert Spencer for The New York Times

She founded her own company in 2003 and hired an industrial design firm. But after growing frustrated with a lack of progress, she turned to her husband, Nick. “He is brilliant at coming up with things, so he went into the garage and came up with our first prototype for a rolling book bag,” she said.

Today, Ms. Udall, 52, is chief executive of Züca Inc., a \$2 million business in Campbell, Calif., that makes luggage. Her husband works for her as vice president for design and manufacturing.

“The buck really stops at me,” she said.

Ms. Udall’s situation may be somewhat unusual, but it is hardly unique.

At a time when high-profile women have suffered some setbacks on Wall Street and when women in general still struggle for pay parity, a group of entrepreneurs has proved that women are comfortable not only with running their own companies, but also with having their husbands work for them. In addition to finding ways to work together at home, the couples have created a separate balance of power in their business relationship. And though it may help that both partners do this to enrich a family enterprise, the woman may make a conscious effort to ensure that her mate is getting appropriate recognition.

While there is no data on the number of such companies, women were the majority owners of 7.7 million privately held firms at the end of 2006, up 42.3 percent from 10 years earlier, according to the Center for Women’s Business Research.

Generally, these couples say they have made the unconventional partnerships work by carefully delineating their respective roles and playing to each other’s strengths.

“That she would be chief executive was not an issue from the get-go,” Mr. Udall said. “When I first met her, I realized that she was one of the best salespeople I ever saw. I come from operations and marketing.” He sensed that what the business needed at the top was someone like his wife, “a charismatic person with a vision.”

SOME family advisers say that whatever the route, the odds are loaded against couples working well together.

“I think it is far more challenging,” said Laura Colin, who ran a family business with her husband, Larry, and was co-author with him of “Family Inc.,” a study of family businesses. “Men and women are made differently, and men generally — it is the testosterone thing — they are more compelled to dominate and get credit than women are,” she said. “I think that women are more team-oriented and will try to focus on the goal.”

Carol Kotewicz-Dencker, who has worked with her husband, Gregory Dencker, for 20 years, said those challenges could be overcome.

The couple met in 1988, when Mrs. Kotewicz-Dencker put an ad in The San Francisco Chronicle to recruit someone for Renoir Staffing Services, the temp agency she built that serves the real estate management business.

She had always wanted her own business. “I was an only child,” she recalled. “I was never raised with gender standards where boys do this and girls do that. It never occurred to me that women could not go out and do the same thing as men.”

But after three years as an entrepreneur, her annual revenues were a mere \$200,000. Then, she said, “I found this one guy that was really above average.”

“He had been a pool and spa contractor so he spoke the language of the people he was hiring and could supervise them,” she recalled. “So I hired him.”

His arrival freed her to focus on the company’s growth and budgeting. Five years later, they married.

Today, Mr. Dencker is chief operating officer of the business, which is based in Oakland, Calif.; it had \$7 million in revenue last year, he said. His wife, the chief executive, handles sales and promotion.

The men interviewed for this article seemed comfortable working at family companies controlled by their wives, perhaps because those who agree to that arrangement are not threatened by it. It was the wives who tended to be more sensitive about the potential pitfalls of having their husbands on the payroll.

A wife’s fear of making her husband feel emasculated in the workplace is a real consideration, said one Chicago psychotherapist, who requested anonymity out of concern for the privacy of her patients.

Jessie, left, and Laurent Boucher in the kitchen of their company. Ms. Boucher is C.E.O., and Mr. Boucher is executive chef.



Mrs. Kotewicz-Dencker said she was aware of the tensions that could arise over compensation. She believed that “men really do measure themselves in the money more than women do,” she said. So, early on, she came up with a financial arrangement that has worked well for the couple.

“One year I get the lower salary, and he gets a higher salary, and the next year we reverse it,” she said.

“I don’t think Greg could feel emasculated, because he is such a balanced individual and sure of himself,” she added. “But I did not want him to feel undervalued.”

Though the growing role of women in business may have made it easier for men to accept wives’ leadership, a man who works for his wife still raises eyebrows.

Ms. Kotewicz-Dencker, like Ms. Udall, owns 100 percent of the company. “In the beginning it was uncomfortable because men made fun of it,” Ms. Kotewicz-Dencker said. “‘Oh, you can’t get a job except working for your wife,’ they would tease Greg.”

But, she added, “Greg says that ownership is unimportant to him because he does better in this world when he is advocating for someone.”

Mr. Dencker concurs. His father worked as a regional sales manager for [Lee A. Iacocca](#) at Ford. “Lee was a great visionary, and my dad could carry out the management tasks,” Mr. Dencker recalled. “I said to Carol, ‘I can’t see the larger picture, but when you lay it out for me, I can make it happen,’ so why would I fight against that? I had my dad as a role model and I loved him dearly.”

The safest way to dispel tension in a wife-owned business, experts say, is through a division of labor. Couples need to structure things so that it is “crystal clear about who has final say about what decisions,” said Joseph Astrachan, executive director of the Cox Family Enterprise Center at Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

Jessie and Laurent Boucher learned that lesson the hard way. They met in Paris when Jessie was studying cooking; Laurent later moved to San Francisco and joined her business, which prepares meals and delivers them to customers’ homes. After their marriage, they worked side by side in the kitchen until Mrs. Boucher concluded that two cooks spoiled the broth.

“It became clear that he needed his own space,” recalled Mrs. Boucher, the company’s chief executive. She took over running the business. “It was an obvious choice because I am more of a forward visionary and he can execute very well,” she said.

Married for 21 years, with a 14-year-old son, Mrs. Boucher says that there are times when she wants her husband “to take over some of my responsibilities, but he is really O.K. being on my staff.”

“And don’t forget that he gets the credit for being the chef,” she added.

Mr. Boucher, the company’s executive chef, is content with the arrangement. “It was obvious that she was more developed in the business side,” he said, adding, “Bless her, I am a happy chef.”

Mr. Boucher’s compensation from their \$2 million business is based on profits, and though it varies, it is never more than his wife earns. “But we have shared everything,” she said. “We don’t have separate bank accounts.”

Part of the reason Mr. Boucher may be comfortable in his role is his family history. His father, whom he admired, worked in a family business run by his grandmother, whom he also loved. “I could see my dad and her working together and doing well,” he said. “I think that inspired me.”

IF it allows a man to do work he enjoys, working for his wife’s company can have great appeal. Evan Jacobs, who works for his wife, Liz Kaplow, at the Manhattan public relations firm she founded, became a lawyer under pressure from his family.

“My father pushed me into law, and for me it was a means to an end” of going into business, Mr. Jacobs said. “I never loved the practice of law.”

But he did like helping his wife in her business, where he found the work more varied and interesting. When Ms. Kaplow set up the firm, Kaplow Communications, in 1991, her husband, who had been her high school sweetheart, helped her in his spare time. Eventually, he closed his own small law firm, and they now are co-owners of the business, which has revenue of more than \$10 million. She is the chief executive, and he is the chief financial officer.

Frank Borzacchiello met his future wife, Maureen, at a dance club when he was 18. He was immediately fascinated by her focus and vision. “She had a whole list of what she wanted to do,” he said, adding that most of the girls he had been meeting at the time were working part time as receptionists or at supermarkets. “She was like: ‘I’m running the show,’” he recalled. “I am more mellow.”

The youngest of five children in an Italian-American family, he grew up largely in Italy. When they had been married for seven years, Mrs. Borzacchiello started Creative Display Solutions, a company in Garden City, N.Y., that builds trade show displays. As her husband moved from construction to mortgage brokerage, he was spending more and more time helping his wife.

Still, the couple were nervous when he joined the company in sales. "I definitely had attitude," Mrs. Borzacchiello recalled. "I figured that I had been doing this for a long time and I know how to do it all and you are going to do it my way."

Eventually, she learned to listen to his views on trade show preparations. Today, he is the company's chief operating officer. Mrs. Borzacchiello does not soft-pedal her role at the \$3 million company. "I am the visionary," she said. "I am the rainmaker. Because he has the systems in place, I can grow the business."

Though such relationships may seem nontraditional to outsiders, the children of such couples appear to be quite comfortable with the situation. Lauren DiMinico, 25, is the daughter of Sharon DiMinico, who founded Learning Express, a \$100 million business in Devens, Mass., that franchises toy stores. Her father, Lou DiMinico, who has his own real estate firm, started working for his wife's company in the late 1980s when the commercial real estate market slowed.

Lauren, a skier and a licensed pilot, is set to enter Harvard Business School this fall. She hopes to follow her parents into their business, and thinks that their relationship has a smart division of labor.

"They complement each other," she said of her parents. "My father is very, very good at negotiations."

Mr. DiMinico, the company's executive vice president for real estate, has no conflicts working for his wife. "There is no question that she is the brains behind this," he said during an interview at the company's headquarters.

"She is driven," he added. In contrast, "I could retire," he said. "I would ski and fly and garden."

Mrs. DiMinico, 62, kept 100 percent ownership of the company until lawyers told her that it was not smart estate planning. About eight years ago, when she decided to put half the company in her husband's name, "there was a little bit of trepidation," Mrs. DiMinico acknowledged. But today she says she has no regrets.

NOT all such business arrangements end so happily.

Ella Kosciak, the chief executive of Management Decisions Inc., a consulting and staffing firm in Norcross, Ga., bought control of the company from a former business partner in 1994. She had met her husband, who was a client, several years earlier.

"It was love at first sight," she recalled. "Six months later we were married."

Ms. Kosciak did not set out to bring her husband on board. But as the company grew and pressure built on her, she turned to him. "I was pregnant with my second child, and it was overwhelming," she said.

In 1998, Mr. Kosciak quit his job as director of software development at NCR to join his wife's firm. At the time, Management Decisions had \$35 million in sales, his wife said; sales are now \$85 million.

But today Mr. Kosciak is gone, pushed out by Mrs. Kosciak, who divorced him last year. "He really wanted me gone, so he could take over more of the chief executive's role," she said.

Mr. Kosciak denied that his goal was to run the company. "After all, I was running the back-office operation," he said. In his view, the problem was that although they had sharply defined roles in the office, at home they shared

every responsibility — and argued constantly over who was doing what. “It could have been who was cooking dinner or taking out the garbage,” he said. “It became like keeping tabs on each other.”

At the company, Mrs. Koscik said, “he had an opportunity that most men never get. He had the chance to get in and learn.” But, she said, “he cared more about the job than the family and our marriage fell apart.”

Her husband countered that the job was “part of who I am, but it was not more important than the family or my marriage.”

Mrs. Koscik said she now regrets having given him 5 percent of the firm. But, she said, “he did a great job as a chief financial officer.”