

Personal Business



Susan Greenwood for The New York Times

When both spouses work from home, who prepares the meals? The author, center, and her husband, Kalle, who run a consulting firm, have decided to outsource the task. Heather Cannon, left, delivered a recent lunch to their home in Palm Beach, Fla.

Working at Home: For Better, for Worse

By JANE ALLEN PETRICK

MY husband and I both work from home. He's a telecommunications marketing consultant. I'm a professional writer and speaker. Our workplace is our home and our home is our workplace. On that simple fact hangs the fate of our marriage.

I came to this realization one lunchtime as my husband, Kalle, and I circled each other in the kitchen. I coldly made my tuna salad, sat down and ate it. He looked puzzled, as he grabbed a hunk of cheese and slunk back to his office.

"The nerve!" I said to myself. "What right does he have to expect me to make lunch for him just because we're both at home? After all, I'm working, too."

Four months earlier, each of us had bailed out of the corporate world. Kalle, an executive at Northern Telecom, and I, an executive at AT&T Wireless, formed our own consulting firm, **Informed Decisions International**. Soon after, I noticed that during our workday, whenever I went to the kitchen, my husband responded to the sound of the refrigerator door the way a cat responds to that of a can opener.

The afternoon of the tuna-cheese face-off, sitting at the kitchen table, I felt guilty and confused about my anger. We both love to cook, but before we left the corporate world, I had insisted on making most meals. Now, during my working hours, I wanted none of it. My husband was confused.

What was happening with us is not unusual. The Small Business Administration estimates that 800,000 businesses are jointly owned by a man and woman, a total growing by about 5 percent a year. And a major worry for small-business people, right up there with cash flow, is "driving my spouse crazy," according to Working Solo, a marketing firm based in New Paltz, N.Y. That fear is especially common among work-at-home couples, whether or not they have joined in a single enterprise. It's not just Kalle and me.

My training is in organizational psychology. I am supposed to help people at work, not make them crazy. So I set out to distill some lessons from the experience of working at home with my husband. This is what I found:

What works at home doesn't work at work, even when work and home are one.

Because we work in the same space, a space that also happens to be our home, all of our marital presumptions are now in the workplace and all of our workplace presumptions are now in the home.

Consider how I used to dress for work. My presumption: "Hey, it's my office and I'll dress like I want to."

But I am not alone in my office-home. As Kathy Marshack, author of "Entrepreneurial Couples" (Davies-Black Publishing, 1998) suggests, when you sit across from your partner at a home business meeting in your jammies, the wrong presumptions may be made. Because I am at the age — 54 — when I am embroiled with my husband, who is 52, in thermostat wars, I used to appear at our meetings in a lot less than jammies. I quickly discovered that this distracted him from serious consideration of my business opinions. Now I cover up.

Or consider dishes in the sink. That had been a no-no. We used to live in Manhattan, where dirty dishes were an invitation to turn the apartment into a roach motel. When we started working at home — part of the year in Palm Beach, Fla., and part in Woodstock, N.Y. — we presumed that the rule still applied. After some stressful lapses, we now know it's better to have dirty plates in the sink than late proposals in the mail.

However long you've been married, be ready to meet another side of your spouse.

I hadn't known how Kalle did business because, well, I had never done business with him. And, of course, I had no idea he didn't do business the same way I did.

When it comes to office equipment, for example, I am a technological troglodyte. Burned by the chaos that followed so-called

upgrades in the corporate world, I am a very late adopter. Kalle, however, is a technology whiz, buying and installing all the latest and greatest equipment. So when the new telephones arrived for our home office, I thought a spaceship had landed on my desk. After a few days of my mumbling about baffling gadgets, and his grumbling about dinosaurs, we talked. We realized that our business and our marriage benefited from Kalle's expertise and my caution.

Now we buy only equipment that I can understand or that he has time to explain.

How your parents worked is still at work.

Growing up, Kalle and I got different messages about work. He was raised in a Finnish-Brazilian family of reserved diplomats and educators, I in an African-American family of a scrappy real estate man and his wife. In Kalle's home, work was done "out there," by grown-ups. In mine, work was done "right here" by all: Mom wrote rent receipts, and I stamped envelopes.

So my husband and I are both entrepreneurs, but with a difference. My fears of technology aside, I am what psychologists call an "all 'rounder": adaptive and ready to do whatever needs to be done. Kalle is an organizer: rational, administrative, ready to find the right person to do what needs to be done. When our company started, I was shocked that Kalle wanted to hire someone to design the logo; he was horrified that I wanted us to whip up something on the computer. Talking it out helped us get to the cause of the brouhaha: the messages we got in childhood about hiring people. We agreed that, with all our computer equipment, we could design the logo ourselves.

TALKING things out. That's been the key to success for our marriage and our company. Not able to finish my tuna salad, I went to Kalle's office, apologized and asked him to help me figure out what to do about lunches. Now we do what all those folks in the big companies do: We order in. □