

The **business**

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Meet the couples who are making it work

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Life partners and work partners....

Your partner is the other half of you - but could you cope if they were also the other half of your business? We ask six couples for the low-down on their 24-7 relationships...

John & Emma

Were it not for some well-meaning friends, John and Emma Chidlaw would never have met and fallen in love - and one of Sheffield's most rapidly growing companies would not exist.

John is forever grateful to pal Micky Mathers for signing him up to a dating site and finding the woman who changed his life. Though when he first found out, he was horrified.

"I was 30 with a broken relationship behind me and a young daughter. I wanted to focus on her and my career. I was done with romance," says John, who grew up in Hillsborough and Shiregreen.

Micky had put his mate's profile on TV property guru Sarah Beeny's website My Single Friend. He had even searched for a suitable match - and found Emma.

Meanwhile, Emma's friend Kerry Woods was confessing she had secretly done the same thing - and found John.

"I was pretty cross at the time," says Emma, who was a single mother of two happily running her own coffee shop in Wakefield. "But John and I started chatting online and hit it off. And after our first date, neither of us wanted to look any further. Our friends chose well for us. Within three months I was pregnant."

At the time, John was the UK sales director of a national company providing cleaning and security services.

"I brought in £26 million of orders in my first seven months with the company and asked Emma if we could do for ourselves," he says. "She said we should go for it. She knows that when I get an idea in my head I don't let go."

With just £5,000 they launched Unita Maintain Ltd in April 2012. It now employs 400 and predicted turnover this year is £4.5 million.

Based in a suite of offices at Handsworth, the company works countrywide, providing



Who's the boss?

"Emma, without a doubt," says John. "We all recognise it. I'm the MD and get the final say on decisions, but afterwards when I talk it through with Emma she often helps me to see things I hadn't thought of and I end up changing my mind."

Relationship Rule

"We don't raise our voices to each other or criticise each other. We love each other and if we disagree on something, we talk it through like adults."

"The strength of the business is down to the strength of our relationship, without a doubt"

facilities management, cleaning, grounds maintenance and repair services.

"We do everything from window cleaning and security to fire risk assessment and Legionella testing," explains John.

Clients now include major supermarket chains and the 24-site Manheim Car Auction Group.

Says John: "Our turning point came last May when we pitched for a £750,000 contract to clean and maintain an abattoir in Scotland for Morrison's. It was so big we didn't expect to get it. We did such a good job we now have seven contracts with them," says John.

The latest contract, cleaning the largest abattoir in Europe, will take up 60 of their staff and is worth £1.4 m to the couple, who are both still only 38.

"The strength of the business is down to the strength of our relationship, without a doubt," says John. "We are a great team and are happy to be together 24 hours a day."

"I'm the MD and my focus is sales. But Emma it is indispensable to the business. She's our operations director and is extremely organised, she's great at thinking out of the box, spots issues that no one else has - and she reins me in," he says.

"I bought my second ops manager Lee a company Range Rover a few weeks ago. When Emma found out she told me I'd gone over the top and confiscated my company credit cards!"



Peter & Hannah

Peter Lacole moved half-way around the world for love.

The Australian carpenter met Sheffielder Hannah Duraid travelling in Croatia and Budapest and a relationship blossomed.

They ended up spending eight months adventuring together and when Hannah came back to complete her teaching PGCE at Hallam University, Peter decided to move to Sheffield with her.

They set up home but unable to work as a carpenter in the UK, Peter ended up in a call centre. "He hated it and was missing home, family and friends. Meanwhile I was immersed in coursework," remembers Hannah, 24.

"We wracked our brains for a solution and realised we needed to find a business venture for Peter."

The pair recalled a Crystal Maze-style reality escape game they had played in Asia, where the concept has been popular for 10 years.

"It was in its infancy in the UK and we decided we could do better than the ones we researched. A year ago we set up The Great Escape at the Avec building on Sidney Street near Sheffield Railway Station," says Hannah, of Norton Lees.

Peter, 29, used his skills to hand-make

scenery and they spent their savings on public liability insurance, staging equipment and props. Meanwhile Hannah put teaching plans on the backburner to focus on expanding the business.

Recently voted the No1 thing to do in Sheffield on TripAdvisor, the Great Escape Game is the city's biggest live escape room experience.

Customers pay to be locked in a room and have only 45 minutes to solve a series of intricate puzzles to escape.

The four rooms - The Mad Scientist, Homicide, Alcatraz and Placebo - aim to blur the lines between the hum-drum of everyday life and the world of video games and movies.

"It's a test of common sense, logic and friendship," says Hannah. "It's a team-building exercise for companies but also a great way to get to know how your partner's mind works and how you interact as a couple."

Setting up the business, which now employs 14 casual workers and has plans to expand, has done exactly that for Hannah and Peter.

They worked out each other's strengths - Hannah manages the staff, handles bookings and online marketing and Peter excels at the statistical analysis and forward-planning.

But more importantly, setting up in business

probably saved their relationship. Without the joint focus, Peter could have become so homesick he felt compelled to go back to Oz.

"It's brought us even closer," agrees Hannah. "It's our baby, something we have created together and want to nurture so it can reach its potential."

"We dream about the business when we're asleep, it's the first thing we think about when we wake up and we talk about it around the clock."

"We get tired and there are rows sometimes, but we've learned to take control of them, let go and move on. We don't do lingering grumbles and grudges."

Who's the boss?

"Neither. It's a team effort. Feedback says people love the chemistry between Peter and I," says Hannah.

Relationship Rule:

To have a day off together once a week. We have worked 12-hour days seven days a week for nearly a year. It's been crazy and very tiring.

John
& Eva

For five years their romance was so long-distance, they could only see each other once a month.

The Athens 21-year-old media student was dating a student of international trade, a seven-hour car journey away in Kastoria, Northern Greece.

So they took the drastic step of moving all the way to Sheffield to let their relationship blossom.

Now Eva Chatzopoulou and John Papatzikakis not only share a home in Sheffield's Kelham Island, they are partners in business.

"In Greece we decided we both wanted to continue studying, but we had been apart for long enough and made a pact to study in the same city," says Eva, now 29.

They set their sights on the UK, Eva was accepted for an MA in web journalism and social marketing at the University of Sheffield and John gained a place at Sheffield Hallam to study an MSc in international business management.

"When we arrived four years ago life was difficult. Everything was so different to Greece. But finally we had each other and that got us through," says Eva. "Then we fell in love with Sheffield and the Peak District and decided to stay."

They each undertook a second Masters

Relationship Rule:

Don't talk about the business after clocking off at 7pm. "We realised we were discussing work all night long. It was taking over and we wanted to protect our relationship", says John.

Who's the boss?

John, because of his financial experience, says Eva.

and had their sights set on individual careers - she as a journalist, he as a logistics specialist. But when the economic crisis deepened in Greece, they decided to go into business together.

"We wanted to help fellow Greeks through their financial plight and realised the gorgeous artisan produce we brought back for friends after trips home could be the way," says Eva.

"Few Yorkshire delis and farm shops stock Greek products because there isn't a big Greek population here. Yet Brits who holiday in Greece know how good our olives and olive oil, dips, desserts and pastries are. So we approached our country's best independent food producers and set up an import business."

E-shop Amalthea's Deli (www.amaltheadeli.co.uk)

launched in October selling Greek specialities and cuisine retail and wholesale. Its products are also sold at Porter Brook Deli and Barra Organics on Sharrowvale Road and the Alyssum Cafe Bistro in Crookesmoor; both in Sheffield, which also uses them in its dishes and stages Greek meze nights with John and Eva.

"We are proud to be showing people how fabulous Greek produce is, but even prouder that we are helping family businesses struggling to survive," adds Eva.

"Working together was never our plan. We are very different. I am emotional, imaginative and good at words and communication; John is logical, rational and a mathematician. But our different attributes and attitudes work together. I talk to potential customers and do our online marketing and John is the business brain. He also works with his father's logistics equipment company in Greece and understands the complexities of international trade."

There are occasional arguments at work but the relationship has grown deeper because of the business venture.

Says John: "We have total trust in each other and the same goals. We can be completely honest when we feel criticism is needed because we love each other. That makes a powerful business partnership."

Terry & Jackie

By day, he was the house husband who kept the home fires burning while mum of two Jackie Freeborn pursued a high-flying career.

But by night, Terry was the earner.

A professional musician, he was in demand as a drummer and vocalist and often worked weekends too as Jackie ran a social enterprise called disAbility Counts, then went on to develop a South Yorkshire arm of the national charity Business In The Community before becoming chief executive of Business Education South Yorkshire.

One of the region's best-known businesswomen, five years ago she co-founded the work-wise Foundation, which has earned wide respect for helping stem the rise in youth unemployment in Sheffield City Region.

The charity encourages the private sector to help prepare young people for employment and careers in engineering and manufacturing.

Jackie was awarded the International Athena Award in recognition of her professional excellence and community service and says her success could not have been achieved without her husband's support.

"I met Terry when my kids were 11 and 9. I had been a single parent for a few years (after getting divorced) and it was wonderful to have someone supporting me and my kids while I pursued my career," says Jackie, 57.

"But work was forcing us to lead very separate lives. He was in entertainment, I was in the business world and it meant we got little quality time together. When the kids were grown up we set out to find a business that would be a shared interest and commitment."

They took on a franchise selling industrial skincare but its parent company went into liquidation. Undaunted, they set up their own, Skin Care Yorkshire, getting their nature-based formulas developed by a local chemist and made in the region.

Terry set out to sell their soaps, barrier creams, aftercare and sanitisers to local industry, (caterers and hairdressers) and Jackie ran the business around her demanding role with Business Education South Yorkshire.

She's now fully onboard and manages her work-wise commitments, and her role chairing Women in Business for Barnsley and Rotherham Chamber of Commerce, around the business.

"We love working together. We have completely different skills but exactly the same values on how we do business. We have the same sense of pride, commitment to service and quality," she says.

"It's been a huge change for Terry. He knew all there was to know about drum skins; now he's an expert on caring for the skin of factory workers. He's had men telling



Who's the boss?

On paper, it's Jackie, the MD, but the business works like a good marriage, she says; "It's a partnership. Our skills and approaches are very different, but we make decisions together; we don't argue, we've perfected the art of gentle persuasion!"

Relationship Rule:

Don't nag, trust each other and don't let the business replace your marriage.

him their hands are now so soft and clean their wives think they're having affairs!"

The couple have just celebrated the third anniversary of Skin Care Yorkshire with a 100 per cent customer retention figure, their Maxx Care range has been awarded the Made In Sheffield mark and they are planning to expand into other markets as, in addition to cleansing capabilities, their products have healing properties that help manage skin conditions such as eczema and dermatitis.

"We love working together. We have completely different skills but exactly the same values on how we do business. We have the same sense of pride, commitment to service and quality"



Richard & Sara

Richard Pogson met his Miss Right at the most stressful time in his life.

He was in the throes of a divorce and had set up a business, Airmaster Air Conditioning, a year earlier.

"I was going through an emotionally difficult time and as a one-man band there was no structure to my life - I was driving to jobs here there and everywhere and trying to run the business," he reflects.

Then along came Sara, his perfect antidote. They met in 1993 in a local pub in Beighton and her happy-go-lucky, contented attitude to life has been his calming influence ever since.

Within six months, Richard had persuaded Sara to quit her quality control job at a Sheffield textile factory and run the office for him. She trained in book-keeping and looked after the finances.

There were stressful times: "I had never wanted to run my own business. I could have stayed a well-paid engineer for the rest of my life but opportunity fell into my lap when the Scottish air conditioning installations company I worked for went bankrupt," explains Richard.

"I had no business plan. I didn't think about things in advance and it was hand-to-mouth for the first four years. Our overdraft was always at the limit. Payments came just in time

Relationship Rule:

"We've never had one," says Richard. "We've never needed one. I've been passionate about the business but although Sara hasn't, her support has created a great balance and a calming atmosphere at home."

Who's the boss:

"Without a doubt, it's Richard," says Sara. "And I'm happy to be the under-dog."

for us to pay the staff, then we were in the red again. But it created a very strong bond between Sara and I."

Sara became his right-hand woman and her sunny nature helped balance Richard. "She is always happy, is not at all aspirational and has never wanted fancy things and pots of money. That took so much pressure off me. I couldn't have done it without her," he adds.

Richard and Sara brought expertise into the company, now based in Swallownest. Sister-in-law Lisa Pogson came in as financial controller (and is now a co-director). Tony

England arrived as a director and shareholder in 2000, bringing 25 years of mechanical design and services management.

That year Richard and Sara married. It was she who proposed to him - at the wedding venue, just two hours before the surprise ceremony she had planned down to the last detail.

"I knew he would say yes," she says. "But whether he would ever have found the time away from work to ask me and help me plan it is another question."

Today Airmaster is a hugely successful, award-winning business employing more than 40 staff and turning over in excess of £7 million, Richard and Sarah are now in the process of stepping back from it so they can enjoy the fruits of their labour together.

Richard, 55, is stepping down as MD to become chairman and now works just one week in two, Sarah works just a few days a week and the plan is to stop soon.

"We love holidays so there will be a lot more of those. Sara loves gardening and walking our dogs and my hobbies are my building projects and tinkering with my classic cars," he says. "We and the team have worked hard to get the business into the shape it is now. So it's time to ease back and enjoy life."



Richard & Jamie

Caption: Richard Bond, left, and partner Jamie Hemsall

"We always thought it would be a nightmare to work together..."

Jamie Hemsall cheerily admits he had never planned to be in business with his life partner. Neither had he intended to become an interior designer.

The pair had met when Jamie was 21 and in a top London drama school, his sights set on a career on the stage. Richard Bond, two years younger, was at university in Manchester studying business management and on track for a financial career.

Both achieved their ambitions. Richard became an accountant and business analyst, firstly with Tesco where he helped launch Tesco Direct, then with Center Parcs as a main board director.

Meanwhile Jamie worked successfully in London theatre for six years and dabbled in interior design between jobs.

They moved back to Jamie's native Nottinghamshire following a family bereavement, which was when Jamie started his interior design business.

As Jamie Hemsall Ltd grew, he realised that he needed some assistance with the non-design side of the business.

"Richard was just considering a career change and agreed to give me some help, but only on a temporary basis. We both thought we would end up killing each other if it was anything permanent because we thought so very differently," says Jamie.

But being polar opposites made for the perfect formula. The company based in East Drayton near Retford is a multi-award winning practice.

A member of the British Institute of Interior Design and the Society of British and International Design, it works with residential and commercial clients throughout the UK and parts of Europe.

Jamie, now 51, is the design director and Richard, 49, is the company MD. "It worked because we have blind faith in each other's abilities, and realised we needed to leave each other to get on with what we do best," says Jamie.

"Richard manages the contracts, the business planning, the finances, marketing and our media. I do the design. And 2016 is a special year for us. The company is 10 years old and we are celebrating our 30th anniversary together."

Richard and Jamie entered into a civil partnership in 2006 and wed in 2014 immediately after the law changed to allow gay marriage.

"Since we met in 1986 we have seen massive changes in society's attitude to homosexuality," says Richard.

"It is only in retrospect that you realise quite how much society has moved forward. We never really experienced direct prejudice, but when you look back on it you understand there were a lot more everyday hurdles to overcome.

"We had to lie about our sexuality when we got a mortgage together to avoid premiums being inflated. Before civil partnerships we didn't have the same rights regarding inheritance tax and pensions. If one of us had died the other would have had no pension rights and we would have had to pay inheritance tax just to stay in our own home – a very different state of affairs from a married couple.

"But we have always had the support of our families and friends and in business, being gay has not caused a single problem. When clients realise we are a couple they take us at face value. We now count many of them as close friends, which is wonderful."

Who's the boss?

We are each boss of our own specialities. Two halves make one whole.

Relationship rule:

We work long hours together during the week so when we leave the office we made a pact not to talk about business, switch our mobile phones off and forget about emails. It was very difficult at first, but we've got pretty good at it. And we never take personal arguments into the office.