THE GLOBE AND MAIL

MONEY MANAGEMENT

Five tips for couples who have separate financial planners

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New York — Reuters

Published Thursday, Jun. 09, 2016 5:13PM EDT
Last updated Thursday, Jun. 09, 2016 9:59PM EDT

When Rick Parks and his wife, Cindy, got married a couple of years ago, the couple, of Knoxville, Tenn., shared a lot of things together: A home, family trips and holiday gatherings.

One thing they did not share: a financial planner.

They each had their own careers, retirement savings and financial planners – his with Charles Schwab, hers with Primerica, and they were happy with them. "We have different investing styles – I'm more aggressive; Cindy is more conservative," says Mr. Parks, owner of two automotive repair businesses. "We were both in good financial positions, and just felt comfortable with our own planners."

The Parks are not alone in starting out their relationship with different financial planners. In fact, 13 per cent of U.S. couples keep their own respective financial advisers, according to the 2015 Couples Retirement Study by Boston-based money managers Fidelity Investments.

It found 28 per cent of couples reported keeping their financial accounts "mostly" or "completely" separate from their spouse or significant other. That was up from 20 per cent of couples who did so just two years earlier.

The trend seems to be generational. The age group most likely to keep finances separate: Gen Xers, with almost a third of couples keeping their money mostly or completely apart. In comparison, only 23 per cent of baby boomer couples keep their money in different pots.

Part of the reason is that Americans are getting married later than ever, often after careers (and financial plans) have already been established. The average woman gets married at 27, and average man at 29 – both historical highs, according to the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

While keeping separate planners might feel more comfortable at first, it also raises potential problems down the line, like conflicting strategies, overlapping holdings and duplication of fees.

To manage the process successfully, a few tips:

- Hold a team meeting. Get the planners in a room quarterly, or at least annually. "You don't want a situation where one adviser is doing something that completely offsets the strategy of the other adviser," says Jacquette Timmons, a New York financial behaviourist and author of *Financial Intimacy*.
- Don't feel pressured into snap decisions. Keep your existing team in place for a while and see how it feels. "After a few team meetings, that will help you determine if you keep both planners, or if you switch to just one," Ms. Timmons says.
- Unpack your attachment. If you decide that you really like having separate planners, take a step back and look at the reasons why. Is it about performance, personality or fees? Or is it

something deeper and more emotional, such as wanting to retain some control over your own financial life? “Be honest with yourself, and write those reasons out, and have your partner do the same thing,” Ms. Timmons suggests.

- Use the moment to uncover savings. Whatever your final decision about planners, take a close look at other financial areas as well. Maybe one partner has very favourable fees with a particular bank or brokerage, while the other has a terrific deal with an insurer. “There is room for a collection of advisers and products,” says Michelle Fait, a San Francisco planner. “There is nothing wrong with a little competition to see who really offers the best option.”
- Consider a new planner. It is not necessarily a question of choosing one partner’s planner or the other. Much like a couple that moves into a new apartment or house together, you could opt for the “neutral territory” of selecting a new planner for both.

That is what the Parks eventually did, opting for Knoxville planner Rose Swanger of Advise Finance to steward their combined savings – primarily to save on fees, since they had accumulated 14 financial accounts scattered among various institutions.