

Work & Careers**Life lessons from the couples who run start-ups**

Spouses who have a company together say they have to work harder to keep investors on side



Lesley and Nigel Eccles co-founded fantasy sports betting site, FanDuel, in 2009 © Monique Jaques/FT

Jill Martin Wrenn DECEMBER 12 2019

Lesley Eccles, chief executive of start-up Relish, a couples' counselling app, is no stranger to the challenges of setting up a company.

"I think any start-up experience is going to be pretty intense," she says, speaking on the phone from a Wall Street coffee shop. "You're regularly a few months away from running out of money."

The 46-year-old Scot launched Relish in New York this year using an engineering team based in Edinburgh. However, this time she's doing it without her husband, Nigel Eccles, with whom she founded the fantasy sports betting site, FanDuel, in 2009.

FanDuel was not a typical start-up. Months after the company's value topped \$1bn in a [2015 fundraising round](#), the then New York attorney-general Eric Schneiderman ordered FanDuel and its rival DraftKings to [stop taking bets](#), saying the sports sites violated state gambling laws. "We had the FBI investigation. We had the AG threatening us with jail," Ms Eccles remembers. "We had the hyper competitiveness, the hyper growth."

Yet she and her husband, along with their three co-founders, weathered the [legal storm](#). "I think coming out of that, in 2017, one thing that I was very aware of was

that the founding team had come out the other end still really good friends,” she says.

The couple’s bond stayed strong, despite these challenges and pressure from some investors who questioned whether Ms Eccles won her head of marketing role for personal rather than professional reasons. “Every interaction, Lesley had to prove that she was there very much on merit,” Mr Eccles remembers. “I was very direct with people. If they referred to her in a business setting as my wife, that wasn’t appropriate.”

Despite the positive experience of working together, when they stepped down from FanDuel, now owned by gambling company [Flutter Entertainment](#), they chose to go their own way professionally. Ms Eccles has Relish, which has raised \$2.2m in venture funding. Mr Eccles is co-founder and CEO at Flick, a start-up aimed at podcasters who want to create a digital community around their audio content.

Although both are happy in their new roles, the couple misses working for the same company. “Nigel and I worked together for nearly 10 years building FanDuel, and we absolutely loved it,” Ms Eccles says.

Ms Eccles, who met her husband 24 years ago when they were both students at St Andrew’s University in Scotland and has three children with him, continues, “We work really well together. We complement each other really nicely.

“So much so, that with our new businesses, we decided not to work together because truth be told, investors see it as a bit of a yellow flag or a red flag, having a husband and wife combination in a start-up.”

Mr Eccles believes that his wife faced more intense scrutiny from investors than he did, but both felt pressure to prove that their roles as partners and parents would not interfere with the demands of the company.

There has been controversy surrounding the actions of high-profile husband and wife team Adam Neumann and Rebekah Paltrow Neumann, co-founders of WeWork, as well as for the company’s poor [governance standards](#). These problems helped [lead to the collapse](#) of its initial public offering this year.

Happily there is also a long history of successful companies launched by couples. Amy Wilkinson, author of *The Creator’s Code: The Six Essential Skills of Extraordinary Entrepreneurs*, and founder and CEO of Ingenuity, an entrepreneurship advisory company, points to Doris and Donald Fisher. The Fishers started the Gap, the retailer behind clothing brands Gap, Athleta and Old

Navy, in 1969.



Doris and Donald Fisher founded retailer the Gap © Billy Farrell/Patrick McMullan/Getty

“In the interviews and research I did, there is quite a lot to support the fact that founders succeed when they’ve known each other through multiple incarnations,” Ms Wilkinson says. “Maybe they’ve worked together before; maybe they were at university together; maybe they were in large corporations together and rolled out to be first time founders.”

Given the rollercoaster of experiences that start-up founders go through, the more aspects of your partner’s personality that you’ve witnessed, the better. “There’s great advantage in really knowing someone that you’re co-founding with,” Ms Wilkinson says.

But running a company with your life partner carries a risk of blurring personal and professional life. Mr Eccles says weeks would merge into weekends when they were running FanDuel, so the couple tried to maintain a protocol about limiting work-talk to business hours. “We tried to have rules about it, but we didn’t always uphold all of them,” he says. “We tried not to talk about it in bed, [it] was a rule, not always held to,” he laughs.

Even though Lesley and Nigel Eccles are now running separate companies, they’re still close — literally.

“We decided to rent offices right next door to each other, with an adjoining door,” Ms Eccles says. “So we have access to each other to bounce ideas off and see each other for lunch, but we don’t have the issue of investors getting a little bit sniffy

other for lunch, but we don't have the issue of investors getting a little bit silly over having a husband and a wife in a start-up."

How running a charity works for one couple

For Shaninga and Helen Marasha, both 37, commitment to their cause and to each other helps them to run [BIGKID Foundation](#). They founded the London charity to help young people at risk of violence and social exclusion by spearheading sport, leadership and mentoring programmes. Now they also juggle the demands of a young family.

They started the charity in 2008, early on in their days as a couple. Mr Marasha proposed soon after BIGKID was created. Now the charity's annual turnover is more than £235,000, and their daughters are six and nearly two. Ms Marasha is the charity's development director, while Mr Marasha is the CEO.

"It's been a really interesting journey that we've been on, and I get to do it with my best friend," Mr Marasha says. "It makes the job a lot easier."

The challenge they share is keeping work-talk away from home. "As soon as you go home . . . you're always thinking BIGKID," Mr Marasha says. "Ten years in, we finally managed to make [the rule] — 'there's no BIGKID talk in the bedroom'. But that's taken awhile."

This article has been amended since first publication to reflect the fact that Relish has raised \$2.2m in funding.

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