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Fiona Smith

You're married now – what about your name?

As she leaves her confetti-strewn reception, a bride leaves single life behind. But that is not all she abandons as she precedes her new husband into the hired limo – there is also the matter of her maiden name. It may seem old fashioned to be writing about whether a woman should change her name when she marries, but our names are also our brands.

Women are marrying later in life. The median age of first-time brides was 27.7 in 2007 (the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics publication), compared with 24 nine years earlier. They are also starting families later, which means they are much more likely to have developed substantial careers by the time they marry.

But when they change their names, they also risk losing the professional identity they have built over the years. “In some sense, I am starting all over again,” says public relations account manager at Buchan, Danielle Tricarico, who changed her name from Murdolo when she married last October. Tricarico and her husband are both of Italian extraction and, she says, there had been no question in her mind that she would follow tradition.

“Perhaps the toughest part of changing your name is getting work contacts used to it and not losing important contacts because of it,” she says. “Because I work with the media, it did cross my mind that changing my name may affect the ability of those I’ve communicated with in the past to contact me. “Those relationships are paramount to my work, so this was perhaps my biggest reservation, or inconvenience, for changing my name.” Tricarico says she has been using both names on her emails as an interim measure to make sure her regular contacts still open her emails, and says it might take six to 12 months to change everything over. “It’s hard to let go [of a maiden name], but it’s a nice thing to take on your husband’s family name if you can wear it with pride”, Tricarico says. She intends to leave her Facebook profile under its original name, so that old friends can find her. It is difficult to know what the trend is with name changes. No agency in Australia seems to track them (not Births, Deaths and Marriages, the Passport Office, Australian Bureau of Statistics, or the Roads and Traffic Authority).

But marriage celebrants say their experience suggests the majority of brides do change their names, and records from overseas suggest it may be the vast majority.

In the US, it is said to be up to 95 per cent, in Canada 93 per cent and in the Netherlands 84 per cent. These figures include hyphenations of the two names, which make up a smaller proportion of the name changes – 7.3 per cent in the Netherlands, for example. Tony Nolan of the Australian Federation of Civil Celebrants (based in Adelaide) says as many as 98 per cent of his couples want to be jointly introduced under the husband’s name at the end of the ceremony – although this does not indicate whether they follow through with the prolonged process of changing their name at work, with the bank, phone company, Passport Office and Facebook profile.

Yvonne Werner, secretary of the Coalition of Celebrant Associations, based in Melbourne, hazards a guess that 50 per cent of brides change their names, noting that it is legal for people to have two names: one legal name, and one by association (that you are known by). Both celebrants have noticed for the first time a few cases of men deciding to take their wife’s surname – either as a replacement for their own, or as a new middle name.

“I think it is a bit of a gimmick, actually,” Nolan says.

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The managing director of the recruiting company Slade Group, Anita Ziemer, says her impression is that increasing numbers of women are taking the traditional route. “A couple of years ago I asked a couple of girls why they would change their names, and they looked at me like I was from outer space,” she says. “All the women who work in medicine keep their maiden names, although they may use their married name socially. All us 1960s babies keep our maiden names at work,” she says. Through her involvement as a director of the website Kidspot.com.au, which attracts 1 million unique browsers a month, Ziemer has noticed a “huge” shift back to traditional values. The website surveys its members regularly, and Ziemer says she has been shocked at some of the responses: “Some of the data was like a kick in the guts”.

Ziemer says job candidates seem to manage their name change seamlessly: “They don’t seem to think it is a hiccup at all”. Some use both names in their communications, but others have tried their husband’s surname and then switched back to their own for professional reasons, she says.

Associate professor of organisational behaviour at the Melbourne Business School, Isabel Metz, says academics – who make their reputations through publishing – are unlikely to change their names. “Otherwise, if you do a search on an academic, you may not be able to find all their publications,” she says. “It does not make sense in today’s society to change your name unless you agree to the fact that you have now become your husband’s property.” She says women often use two surnames in order to keep their professional and private lives separate.

Career coach Catherine Bourke says when deciding what name to choose after marriage, women have to do what makes them feel comfortable and what “fits with their values”. “Having said that, though, people might want to think about where they are up to in their careers before they change their name,” says Bourke, a director of Directioneering. “The longer they have had their career, the bigger their network. It is such a personal thing.” There is an argument that women write themselves out of history when they change their names. The executive officer of the Society of Australian Genealogists, Heather Garnsey, says trying to trace women through family trees when they change their names is very difficult. “Historically, it has always been one of the most difficult things to do,” she says.

Metz says women in business have generally adopted the Ms appellation to overcome stereotyping about their commitment to a career. “It is rare to see women who use Mrs now,” she says. “Most women want to keep their private life private and avoid those stereotypes.”

Who are you?

Karen Colfer

It took me two years to change from my divine maiden name (Jaggs) to my uninspiring married name of Colfer. This was because I was very well known in the market back then as a good recruiter. My clients and candidates would pass my name on and recommend me to other contacts – very good for business. I had been at my company for nearly eight years so my portfolio was really well established. My surname was also very unusual and people always commented on it, because it was so unusual it was also easy to remember. The change caused lots of confusion for my clients and candidates and, strangely, seemed to unsettle them.

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I remember on my email signature using the term “nee” Jaggs so people could identify with me quickly and easily. New staff would constantly tell callers “we don’t have a Karen Jaggs”. I have no doubt that I would have lost business at some stage. It also confused the headhunters and a lot of the calls stopped for a while. That made me feel vulnerable and quite pissed off. Personally, it also caused lots of grief. My husband and I argued about the name change constantly. He felt insulted that I didn’t want to change my name immediately. I genuinely liked my maiden name and felt as if I was giving up some of my identity. It was also hell to change my name at the bank, my driver’s licence, national insurance card ._._.and the list goes on.

Of course, back then, everything had to be done in person – you couldn’t change your surname without signing 2 million documents, getting them witnessed by a justice of the peace, and that takes time and effort. So, in short, it does affect work – in fact, I believe that my productivity back then was affected for a few months while I sorted this whole situation out. That directly impacted my income...not good!

Karen Colfer is the managing director of recruitment firm Kelly Services Australia.

Cost of a name change: \$500,000

Fiona Smith

Researchers say adopting a husband’s surname feeds into a stereotype that such women are more traditional and less ambitious at work. In the Netherlands, an experiment on university students at the Tilburg Institute for Behavioural Economics Research has found that those who took their husband’s name were viewed as “more caring, more dependent, less intelligent, more emotional, less competent and less ambitious”. The women who kept their own name were judged “less caring, more independent, more ambitious, more intelligent and more competent”.

Another part of the exercise found that the name changers were less likely to be hired (by the student participants) for a fictional human resources position and their salaries were estimated to be about \$1000 less than those who kept their own name. The researchers, in their study *What’s in a Name?*, say: “If women knew how they would be judged, would they still change their name? “Suppose the differences in salary become reality? What’s in a name? Calculated to a working life: €361,708.20 [\$496,100]. That’s more than 1 million ice-creams, a large family house in the middle of the Netherlands, or four luxury BMWs from the 5-series, with all accessories.”

However, Isabel Metz, associate professor in organisational behaviour at the Melbourne Business School, is wary about such research. She says such discrimination may have more to do with stereotyping women of childbearing age.