

Managing romance in the workplace

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Managing Romance in the Workplace

Rather than trying to prevent workers from starting romantic relationships with each other, employers should develop policies to help workers manage these relationships.

by Chantal Gautier

A workplace romance can be defined as some form of intimate relationship between two employees who have both expressed their romantic feelings in the form of dating or other intimate association (Mainiero 1986). Surveys conducted both in the United Kingdom (e.g., Top Sante 2001; Monster.UK 2006) and in the United States (SHRM 2002) highlight the frequency of workplace romances and relationships.

For example, the law firm Peninsula (2002) found that 79 percent of its 1,274 U.K. employees had engaged in a workplace romance, while Portfolio Payroll (2002) learned that seven out of ten workers had fraternized with a colleague at some point in their career. Similarly, the “U.S. Office Romance Survey” by Vault.com (2003) reported that 47 percent of workers had participated in a workplace romance.

When exploring why individuals engage in workplace romances, reasons can be extrapolated across interdisciplinary areas. Theories of attraction play a vital role in explaining the development of romances, and social psychology points out the strong link between proximity, familiarity, and attraction.

The mere exposure effect (Zajonc 1968), for example, suggests that individuals who work in close proximity to one another are prone to developing

interpersonal relationships more frequently than are those who do not work side by side (Anderson and Hunsaker 1985). A great deal of research in social psychology puts forth “similarity”—that is, similar beliefs, attitudes, education, and background—as the root of attraction between people (Newcomb 1956; Shaw 1971). Add Sternberg’s Triangle of Love theory (1986), with its different components of love (intimacy, passion, decision-making, etc.), and it is not hard to grasp why workplace romances occur.

Sociological factors also have contributed to the increasing prevalence of workplace romances. Long working hours and organizational demands (Schor 1991) could well encourage people to socialize within the workplace, because people are spending increasing amounts of their time at work (Pierce et al. 1996). In addition, employers tend to recruit individuals on the basis of person-organization fit (e.g., Fisher 1994), suggesting that the mere sampling of like-minded people could explain how the similarity and familiarity effects come into play so strongly at work. Thus, it could be argued that the recruitment practices currently used by organizations indirectly contribute to the development of workplace romances.

All in all, would it be bold to propose that organizations unwittingly are accountable for creating the “perfect playground” for relationships to flourish?

UNWRITTEN UNDERSTANDINGS

Organizational culture, attitudes, and beliefs also play an inherent role in the way companies conceptualize, tolerate, and manage workplace romance activity. Earlier workplace romance literature

focused on managers’ and co-workers’ perceptions of others’ relationships at work to understand and define the workplace romance phenomenon (Brown and Allgeier 1996; Devine and Markiewicz 1990; Karl and Sutton 2000; Foley and Powell 1999). This early research found that hierarchical relationships were seen as negative (Brown and Allgeier 1996), a viewpoint still common today—57 percent of workers consider a workplace relationship unacceptable when it involves either an employee dating a boss, an employee dating upper management, or a manager dating a subordinate (Vault 2003).

Favoritism (Quinn 1977), loss of credibility, gossip, hostility among co-workers (Devine and Markiewicz 1990; Rapp 1992), and impact on productivity (e.g., Pierce et al. 1996) are all perceived as negative consequences of workplace romance activity. An ongoing study by Gautier (2006), however, has found that productivity declines only when relationships end and couples are unable to put their differences aside but must continue to work together. The following comment is typical:

“Umm, the time I knew that the relationship had ended, I started to get very ill. I was physically as well as emotionally unwell. My performance did get worse. I really lost the plot, actually.”

Anderson and Hunsaker (1985), Lobel et al. (1994), and Mainiero (1989) support this view, finding that productivity levels do not always drop. In fact, those involved in a workplace romance often appear to be happier at work,



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enthusiastic, motivated, and above all determined to alleviate line managers' fears that their workplace romance will have a negative effect on work.

Still, the common perception of workplace romances appears to be mainly negative, to the extent that a minority of work organizations have banned them altogether. In the United Kingdom, approximately 20 percent of employers have some type of policy on how to manage workplace romances (www.hrlaw.co.uk 2003). Staples, the office retail supplier, maintains a non-fraternization policy that can lead to dismissal and resignation if breached (Cropper 1997). Lloyd's of London also has a non-fraternization policy, with transgressions leading to possible transfer but not dismissal.

The Vault.com 2003 survey revealed that 36 percent of workers were not aware of any existing romance policy. In an earlier survey of U.S. human resources professionals (SHRM 2002), 72 percent of respondents admitted to not having a policy addressing workplace romance. More worryingly, 14 percent claimed to have some form of "unwritten understanding."

The nature of "unwritten understandings" is not always straightforward, making it difficult for those romantically involved to interpret exactly what they can and cannot do. Trying to make sense of these "understandings" may force individuals to socially construct what they perceive as culturally acceptable within their organization, leaving many unclear as to what is tolerated and what is not (McLean et al. 1998).

DIFFICULTIES OF 'LOVE CONTRACTS'

In a 2006 survey, 31 percent of employees—compared with just 9 percent of human resources professionals—felt their companies' policies were mostly intended to prevent workplace relationships. Fear of sexual harassment claims is a key reason that human resources professionals wish to prohibit workplace romance activity or at least discourage it (SHRM 2006).

For example, Delta Airlines and Johnson & Johnson have guidelines that prohibit relationships between supervi-

tor and subordinate (Overman 1998). Other U.S. organizations have started using so-called "love contracts" or "consensual relationship contracts" (SHRM 2002) spelling out that a relationship is mutually agreeable and consensual and that, if and when it reaches a breaking point, both parties are to resolve any disputes and avoid accusations of a sexual harassment nature. In turn, the contract is supposed to protect those involved from dismissal, demotion, or transfer.

Perhaps the central concern for employers is not to thwart workplace romances but to manage them wisely.

This solution is not without difficulties. Clarke (2006), for example, questions whether the U.K. Employment Equality (Sex Discrimination) Regulations of 2005, along with recent interpretations of the Sex Discrimination Act, truly protect women in a workplace romance from accusations of a sexual harassment nature or continue to leave women vulnerable to harassment and other forms of unacceptable behavior following the termination of the romance. According to Powell (2001), women in lower positions continue to receive more punitive measures (e.g., job transfer and dismissal) than do men.

ARE WORKPLACE ROMANCES POLITICIZED?

A discussion of whether employers have a right to decide with whom we fraternize and who we should avoid raises important questions. First, should organizations be allowed to prohibit romantic activity in the workplace to protect their own interests? The early research in this area suggests relationships have a negative impact on the workplace, but more recent work presents a more complex picture.

Second, should workplace activity be legislated? Is it realistic and, if so, what would it achieve? Finally, could

workplace romance policies be considered a direct violation of individual rights? The issue of individual rights is a complex one, and employers walk a fine line trying to protect their own interests while not impinging on their workers' individual freedoms.

Perhaps the central concern for employers is not to thwart workplace romances but to manage them wisely. In so doing, the challenge is to strive for a balance between the following:

- Promoting a culture that understands, recognizes, and acknowledges the development of workplace romances;
- Developing a report, readily accessible to all members of the organization, that discusses the pros and cons of workplace romance activity;
- Maintaining a workplace atmosphere flexible enough to allow and trust people to make decisions about their relationships, particularly when issues of hierarchy, reward, and productivity come into play; and
- Implementing support systems to help resolve issues between workers coping with the aftermath of a workplace romance.

The emphasis of the support systems is on empowerment. Individuals experiencing a break-up ought to feel that they are still "in control," and for this reason support systems should be in place to help facilitate this process. Human resources professionals, managers, and supervisors alike ought to be trained to understand the mechanisms of why and how workplace romances develop and to discreetly address and facilitate any problems arising from workplace romances.

CAPTURING THE ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE

Workplace romances are a part of organizational life, and prohibiting them will not solve any of the associated problems or make them fade away. Qualitative research methodology is about capturing the experience and realities of individual accounts, yet most workplace romance literature focuses on managers' and co-workers' perceptions and the problems that organizations and managers face when confronted with these issues.

The author proposes that capturing

the thoughts and feelings of those currently (or previously) involved in a relationship at work will add new perspective to current thinking on managing workplace romances. A guide to facilitating workplace relationships that considers the needs of a broader group of stakeholders will surely better protect the full interests of the organization—

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including the productivity and well-being of employees experiencing the highs and lows of a relationship in such a closed environment as the workplace. ■

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