

How to Survive Office Romance

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One out of three people admits to dating a co-worker. That has some bosses worried that too much work time is being wasted wooing at the water cooler.

If you've noticed an extra dose of Valentine's Day cheer around the office lately, it's not your imagination. On-the-job romance is on the rise. With Americans working longer and harder than ever, many people are now looking to bring more than just a paycheck home from work.

In fact, a new survey by Randstad USA, an Atlanta-based staffing firm, shows that at least 30% of employed adults have dated a co-worker, and 27% admit to a bit of colleague-to-colleague kissing.

That has some bosses worried that too much work time is being wasted wooing at the water cooler. "Theoretically, I'd say no to [office dating] because there's such a possibility for distraction," says Keith Miller, owner of Oakland-based California Canoe and Kayak. But in practice, he admits, it's nearly impossible to control: Over the past two decades, his mom-and-pop operation has spawned at least five marriages, as well as a number of more temporary unions.

Some companies try to make sure employees keep their eyes on their monitors -- and not their colleagues -- by forbidding interoffice dating altogether, but in many states, such non-fraternization policies are themselves illegal. Even where the policies are permitted, however, experts warn that such rules are a surefire way for a business to project a stodgy image, and may actually hinder productivity.

"It speaks to the culture," says Dr. Mallery Tytel, president and owner of Healthy Workplaces, a Hartford, Conn.-based coaching, planning, and consulting firm. "Some companies are about 700 pages of rules, others treat things more softly." When employees start hooking up, it can be a sign of a vibrant work environment where they actually interact and enjoy each other -- something many companies covet, Tytel says.

While smaller, more informal companies lend themselves to such a culture, it can also blossom at much bigger corporations. Take Southwest Airlines, which boasts more than 1,000 married couples on the payroll. Melanie Jones, the airline's programs and community events manager, says Southwest encourages interaction among employees at all levels across all departments, and also welcomes spouses and other family members on board. "A couple who is married and works at the same place -- think of the loyalty they're going to have for that company," she says.

Pairing-up on the job can be especially beneficial for people who work a lot of overtime, as it can help create greater work-life balance and foster more understanding at home, Tytel says.

Entrepreneurial couples are especially common. Joel Trammell met his wife, Cathy Fulton, when they were colleagues teaching at a naval nuclear power school. They co-founded Austin-based NetQoS in 1999 with the idea of being able to spend more time together and build a company with a united vision. "It gives you more consistency at the management level that you might not have otherwise," says Trammel, who works as CEO while Fulton is chief technology officer. "You don't have to artificially force teamwork."

Of course, being open to office intimacies doesn't mean that anything goes, and even the most liberal companies tend to frown on supervisors dating their subordinates, since that's where the greatest potential for sexual harassment lawsuits and complaints of favoritism from other employees lies, says Roberta Chinsky Matuson, founder and principal of Human Resource Solutions in Northampton, Mass. Even with relationships between co-workers on equal footing, there's always potential for spats and jealousies that can turn an ordinary office into a soap opera. "When the bloom is off the rose, that's when things get sticky," Matuson says.

Although a study by the Society for Human Resource Management shows that a full 75% of companies have no formal relationship-protocol policies, Tytel says having guidelines in writing -- even if they're as simple as saying "be professional, the workplace is for work" -- is essential to help ward off potential problems.

Since heart strings often tug harder than the purse strings, keeping open channels of communication at the office is also vital. That way, when Cupid does strike, employees feel comfortable working with their boss to find a solution -- be it switching departments, changing locations, or even leaving the company. "These sound like very unromantic type of things, but once a relationship passes a certain point, management needs to be more informed," Tytel says. For example, when NetQoS's Fulton was promoted to be Trammel's supervisor at the naval school, they talked with their superiors, who ultimately agreed to let them keep working side-by-side.

Don't rule out even trickier balancing acts. When Miller, of California Canoe and Kayak, started dating his future wife, Tammy Borichevsky, in 1991, it was more delicate yet, since she was his customer, not his employee. Nowadays, she's operations manager of their Bay Area paddlesports shops and works at the desk right next his. But at the time, Miller says, the relationship seemed so risky that he went out of his way to treat her like any other client. "I was really wary," he says. "I even made her pay full price for her kayak."

The Dos and Don'ts of Office Dating -- for Employees and the Boss

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You just might find that special someone in the next cubicle. But office relationships can also end in disaster. Here are some ways to avoid heartbreak -- and ensure you don't lose your job in the process.

Tips For Employees:

When love is in the air, logistics are the last thing on your mind. But when you hook up with someone from the office, exercise caution. Here are some guidelines to keep things healthy when you're involved in an on-the-job romance:

1. **Be professional.** Though it might be hard to focus with your partner right there at the desk around the corner, remember: At work, work is your first priority.
2. **Be discreet.** That means no racy emails, no flirting, and no intimacies 9 to 5.
3. **Be upfront.** Tell your boss what's going on, and your colleagues, too. That'll open up a dialogue and shut down the rumor mill before it starts churning out of control.
4. **Be flexible.** It's pretty likely that one of you is going to have to make a move within the company, especially if the two of you have a supervisor/subordinate relationship at the office. If that happens, work with your boss to find the best fit.
5. **Be careful.** If your partner suddenly starts giving you the cold shoulder, trying to work things out at work is a sure way to set yourself up for a sexual-harassment lawsuit.
6. **Be prepared.** Consider whether or not you'll be able to stand your job if things do go sour. If not, you might want to have a backup plan in place, just in case.

Tips For Employers:

No matter what your take is when it comes to dating at the office, put it in writing. Businesses with written guidelines have stronger footing if and when a problem does arise than those who fail to address the issue. Here are some things to consider when crafting your company's policy:

1. **Obey the law.** In some places, rules that prohibit fraternization among employees are illegal, so check out your state's laws before you ink your policy.
2. **Maintain order.** Consider prohibiting or at least strongly discouraging supervisors from getting involved with their subordinates, since these are the relationships that are most likely to bring on sexual-harassment lawsuits.
3. **Always stay professional.** If you're open to relationships among colleagues, focus your policy on how coupled employees should conduct themselves at the

office. Remind employees to be discreet and professional and to keep the workplace a place for work.

4. **Stay above the fray.** If you are prohibiting or discouraging office romance, don't get into whether or not you personally agree with it. Instead, keep the policy focused on how such behavior can damage morale, create an uncomfortable work environment, and otherwise negatively affect the company.
5. **Communicate.** Once the policy is in writing, make sure all your employees know about it and make sure to review and update it from time to time.
6. **Educate.** Compliment your policy with a series of sexual-harassment training seminars. Not only will they improve employees' understanding of what's appropriate at the office, but they'll also go a long way in showing you took all the right steps if a lawsuit were ever to arise.
7. **Follow your own rules.** If you frown on inter-office relationships but you yourself are getting pretty friendly with your VP of marketing, your policy is as good as terminated.