

How to manage an office romance

With people spending 40 plus hours per week at the office, relationships are an integral part of our work environment. Though you may prefer them to be purely professional, office romances are a fact of life. In fact, 39% of employees said that over the course of their career they had dated at least one co-worker. The survey found that most office romances begin outside of the office when co-workers bump into each other elsewhere.

Are office romances a potential problem?

No question, they can be problematic; especially given that most office romances last just a few months. Potential concerns include:

- Distraction and lost productivity
- Charges of favouritism
- Anger and antagonism if the relationship goes sour
- Office gossip and jealousy
- Sexual harassment allegations

Implement a policy before an office romance develops. Because office romances are common, the ideal time to deal with this sensitive issue is by establishing a clear policy about office dating beforehand. With a policy in place, office romances can be managed rationally and proactively, without emotion. A policy can also reduce confusion and address concerns about favouritism.

Develop an office romance policy to suit your workplace culture. What's appropriate for your company may be unacceptable for another. With this in mind, collaborate with senior management to draft an office romance policy that's best for your specific situation. For example, is your organization large enough to facilitate a transfer so that romantic couples won't have to work side-by-side or with one partner reporting to the other? Should you ban office romances completely or would a professional code of conduct be a better choice? When developing a policy on office romance, keep the following ideas in mind:

- **What's acceptable and what's not?** For example, you may tolerate relationships between co-workers but not between managers and subordinates or between employees and clients.
- **Sexual harassment.** Now would be a good time to revisit or develop your company's sexual harassment policy, as well as provide sexual harassment training for all staff.
- **Relationship disclosure requirements.** Some companies require disclosure if relationships become romantic or serious.

Manage an office romance as it develops. As it becomes apparent that an office romance has blossomed, early discussions with the couple may be necessary to keep workplace disruptions to a minimum. Refer to your policy for guidance and work with the couple to ensure each person understands how it applies to their situation. While your awareness of the budding romance may prompt these discussions, it is essential to respect the couple's privacy by focusing on concerns about work performance and not details of the romance.

Tips for managing the perceptions of relationships in the office

Love is in the air - at work - and it's not likely to go away. According to a recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management, 43 per cent of human resource professionals reported office romances. Of these, 79 per cent reported either an increase in number (12 per cent) or consistent levels of office romances (67 per

cent) in the last five years. All of those relationships are sure to raise a few eyebrows. So how do you manage perceptions and squash office gossip?

- **Recognize the benefits of office romance.** A survey by Workplace Options and Public Policy Polling found that most Millennial workers (71 per cent) view workplace romances positively, citing effects such as improved performance and morale. 84 per cent of Millennials say they would engage in romance with a co-worker. In contrast, just 36 per cent of workers from Generation X and 29 per cent of Baby Boomers said the same. If the couple in question adheres to your company's policies on dating and plays by the rules, you'll likely be able to find several beneficial aspects to the relationship if you look for them. For example, the individuals may be more productive or happier on the job.
- **Deal with gossip about those involved in the relationship immediately.** Gossip and rumors can negatively impact productivity, hurt feelings, and have long-term detrimental effects on mental health. Containing workplace gossip is a must. When gossip comes to your attention, you may need to speak with the instigator in order to contain it. Leading by example and clarifying expectations of a gossip-free workplace can also play an important role.
- **Deal with perception of those involved.** Credibility and trust could be at stake. For example, one employee may hesitate to share information with another if the other employee is dating a manager. According to an article on Psychology Today, a study about peers who date at work found that employees perceived co-workers who dated superiors as less credible than those who dated peers. In addition, women were deemed as less trustworthy and less credible than men in an office romance situation. As a manager, you may not be able to shape the perceptions of others, but you should be aware of their existence and their potential impact on the rest of the team. Refer to your company's policy on office dating, set boundaries and communicate your expectations of appropriate behaviour.
- **Have a plan for when romances fail.** What happens if the couple breaks up or if a married employee goes through a separation or divorce? While it may seem grim to plan for such an event in advance, your company's dating policy should address this issue. On a positive note, according to Match.com's Single in America survey, over half of those involved in a failed office romance reported that it did not affect their professional relationship.

Guess who met at work?

- President and Michelle Obama
- Ozzy and Sharon Osborne
- Bill and Melinda Gates

Resources:

<http://www.workplaceoptions.com/pdf/polls/january2012wposurvey.pdf>
<http://blog.workhealthlife.com/2013/11/gossip-in-the-workplace-can-be-detrimental-to-mental-health/>
<http://www.tlnt.com/2012/02/13/office-romance-millennials-feel-they-have-a-positive-impact-on-performance/>
<http://www.canadianbusiness.com/lifestyle/office-romance-is-good-for-business/>
<http://www.weknownnext.com/trends/office-romance-is-here-to-stay-but-how-employers-deal-with-it-is-changing>

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at 1 800 387-4765 or visit workhealthlife.com.