



Timely Information for Personal Success

Office Romances: Usually a Bad Idea

By Steven Mintz

February will mark Valentine's Day. What better time to talk about workplace romances? Dating in the workplace is a bad idea and can lead to severe consequences for both parties. A serious dating relationship may turn sexual and add another layer of ethical dilemma if and when the relationship goes south. Office romances can stifle productivity, lead to sexual harassment charges, and destroy the workplace environment.

My advice is do not get started in the first place; don't take that first step down the proverbial "ethical slippery slope." That said, office romances can and will continue to occur. So, here is my take on the practice and how it can affect employees and the employer.

What Constitutes an Office Romance?

An office romance is a relationship between two individuals employed by the same company that advances beyond the socially acceptable employer-employee association and the work-related duties that require their interaction. The relationship can be of a sexual nature where employees engage in activities in and outside work or where one employee makes sexually suggestive remarks about the other.

The danger of the latter is in creating a "hostile work environment" that might lead to a claim of sexual harassment. In fact, that is the biggest danger of having an office romance.

If the affair blows up so may the workplace environment. It could lead to one employee doing everything and anything to avoid the other; difficulties in getting work done when working together; and, in the extreme, cyber-bullying.

The truth is office romance is inevitable because people work closely together for hours and can get to know each other in an intimate way that leads to sexual advances. The real question is: *Should employers try to stop them?*

Workplace Dating Remains Common

Dating in the workplace has become commonplace. According to a 2011 survey by the job search

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Healthy Recipe: Chocolate Brownies

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup sifted cake flour
- ½ cup cocoa powder
- 1-1/2 cups light brown sugar
- ¼ cup canola oil
- ¼ cup buttermilk
- 1 large egg
- 2 large egg whites
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

NUTRITIONAL VALUE:

- Calories per serving: 151
- Carbohydrates: 27 g.
- Protein: 2 g.
- Sodium: 94 mg.
- Fat: 7 g.
- Saturated fat: 1 g.

DIRECTIONS:

- 1 Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Coat an 8-by-12-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Dust with flour. Set aside.
- 2 Whisk together flour and cocoa in small bowl. Beat together brown sugar, oil, buttermilk, egg, egg whites, and vanilla in large bowl with electric mixer on high until smooth. Add rest of ingredients and beat on low until blended.
- 3 Transfer batter to prepared baking dish. Bake until knife inserted in center comes out clean, 25-30 minutes.
- 4 Let cool in baking dish on a rack. Cut into 15 bars. Store at room temperature in an airtight container.

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Office Romances...

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website CareerBuilder.com, 38% of workers say they've dated a colleague at some point in their careers. Nearly a third say they married the person they dated at work. Another career website, Vault.com, found that 59% of respondents had dated a colleague at least once during their career.

And fewer workers are keeping their romances secret. CareerBuilder found that 63% of workers who have office relationships are public with them, compared with 46% six years ago. The survey of 7,000 workers was conducted for CareerBuilder by Harris Interactive.

If you "must" engage in an office romance, avoid a supervisor-supervisee relationship. Especially for the person in the supervisor's seat, such a relationship is potentially career-destroying. The supervisee may feel that he or she can't say no for fear of the consequences with respect to the job, promotion, and performance evaluation.

A word to the wise: Do not date within your department in order to create a barrier between what happens inside and outside the office.

Report Dating to HR

Can anything be done from the employers' perspective to reign in the practice? Of course, office romance can be prohibited, but that is unlikely to make a difference when hormones are raging. An employer should require employees to report dating relationships to the HR department, not to prevent

them necessarily but to make both parties aware and sign-off that they are engaging in a consensual relationship. It is like a pre-nup for an office romance. Moreover, if the company has a sexual harassment policy, they should make it clear they understand the rules.

'Dangerous Liaison' Syndrome

Most office romances end, some with lingering awkwardness when one member of the couple wishes that the romance could continue and the other does not. The "dangerous liaison" syndrome is likely to disrupt the workplace. Patterns of distrust emerge. Sides are taken. Reputations are damaged.

The possibilities of retaliation and retribution threaten every assignment and evaluation. Lawyers.com found that the fear of reprisal after a romance ends affects 67 percent of those who have been so involved.

Summary

Here is my final advice. Before you take the plunge consider how you would feel if you lost your job. Everyone who has experienced heartbreak knows that proximity to an ex can be unbearable. All too often, say experts, failed office romances result in one person leaving the job—willfully or not.

Steven Mintz, aka Ethics Sage, posted this on this blog on a previous Valentine's Day.