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Office workers in love may be courting danger

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Dawn Sagario, Des Moines Register

Paul Jackson's co-workers gave him a bit of advice when he started dating a girl at his workplace nearly two years ago. "They said, 'Lay cool at work and keep it professional,'" Jackson said. The 26-year-old, an employee at Fred Nesbit Distributing, is still a firm believer in that philosophy. He repeats it like a personal mantra: "At work, it's strictly business," said Jackson of his relationship with his girlfriend.

Romance in the worker ranks is nothing new. With many of us spending such sizable chunks of our lives at our places of employment, it may not come as much of a surprise when the workplace also becomes, perhaps inadvertently, a potential dating pool.

But before treading the waters of office love, human resources officials and other experts say to think twice about the possible consequences, both personally and professionally.

There's the good: People who work together do fall happily in love. They sometimes even get married. A couple can remain at a company and have successful, productive careers.

Then there's the bad: People who work together do fall happily in love. They sometimes break up. The "love" turns ugly. One person may be so distraught he or she feels the need to leave the company.

Other factors like workplace productivity and relationships among co-workers can be affected. A relationship gone sour could become the breeding ground for claims of sexual harassment or unfair treatment.

A recent survey found that most employers have no policies regarding office romances.

Three-quarters of human resources professionals surveyed by the Society for Human Resource Management and CareerJournal.com indicated that their organizations had no policies regulating such relationships.

Of those that did have a workplace romance policy, 64% said dating was permitted, but discouraged; 28% said their rules allowed these relationships; and 8% said they were not permitted.

"Policies regarding workplace romances are less strict now," said Jo Ellen Whitney, an attorney who practices labor and employment law in Des Moines.

She said employers are recognizing that with the long hours people work, such relationships are inevitable.

What if you're already in the midst of dating someone at work? The bottom line: Stay professional.

"It boils down to conducting yourself like a grown-up when you're at work," Whitney said.

That means no mushy e-mails, Whitney said. And no sexy voice mail.

In her work, Whitney said she has even seen e-mails where people sent naked pictures of themselves.

"If it occurs in the workplace, privacy is an illusion," said Whitney, who helps companies establish policies regarding on-the-job romances.

An office romance between people working in the same department can get complicated, especially if the relationship fizzles, said Jackie Van Ahn, owner of human resources consulting business HR LINK.

Van Ahn has these tips for those dating a co-worker:

- Focus on work at work.
- Leave personal life at the door.
- Don't involve co-workers in the latest romantic details.

There are positives to permitting co-workers to date each other, a career counselor said.

People who are dating but work in different departments can help each other to learn more about the company, as well as meet other people, said Roberta Yoder of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center.

"It can help the employee be better informed, and it can result in an employee who is more loyal to the company," she said.

Greg Lascheid said there are benefits to permitting his employees to date one another.

Lascheid, owner of dating service The Right One of Iowa, said he asks his workers involved in such relationships to take a look at how this will affect their careers.

"I never stand in the way of love — never," Lascheid said.

He also addresses other issues, like encouraging workers to stick to their normal routines in the office. He also talks about how displays of public affection may affect those who work around the couple.

"Everything in moderation, and good taste is always required," Lascheid said. "It's not a high school hallway."

Workers involved in new relationships tend to be happier and focus on tasks at hand, he said, rather than worrying about going out after work to try to meet someone.

But the converse can also be true, he said. That can include problems like a couple that's too caught up in themselves. Or at the other extreme, a pair whose relationship is on the rocks, with the possibility of one employee leaving.

"It's not easy to work with someone you're in love with," he said.

Possible negative consequences of an office romance could be an employee losing the respect of colleagues, Whitney said, or affecting a supervisor's perception of the worker.

Manager/subordinate romances can have extreme legal implications, Whitney said. This can leave the company vulnerable to sexual harassment claims, with an employee claiming to be coerced into the relationship to keep his or her job or to get a raise.

Whitney said other employees also may complain that they were overlooked for a bonus or raise because a manager gave preferential treatment to the person he or she is dating.

Relationships that involve people at different levels of power in the workplace can be especially detrimental.

"Even if the subordinate doesn't work directly under that supervisor, it can create a lot of negative feelings and scandal in the office," said Lyla Payne, 25.

Whitney advises people to steer clear from such involvements.

"They're really high risk for everyone involved, from the employee to the company," she said.

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