

How To Effectively Approach Office Romance

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Office romance though seen as taboo is very much alive in most organisations. Despite organizational efforts to curb or discourage employees from engaging in a workplace romance, but the truth is there is no sure way of stopping coworkers from canoodling. According to research, 46% of employers would prefer their staff, not to date, this came by after a revelation that McDonald's had fired their Chief Executive Officer Steve Easterbrook after he had been found to be having a relationship with an employee. Another study showed that 48% of us will date a fellow employee at some point in our careers. Employers may not like workplace romance, yet research shows that 22% of flings actually involve a manager or boss.

Furthermore, 41% of first kisses between colleagues happen at work or at work events. To add more spice, 36% of those surveyed admit their office fling was actually extramarital for at least one of the participants. Most office romances take place undercover and are kept as a secret even from fellow colleagues. Office romance is usually kept hush-hush due to the consequences that follow once it comes into the limelight for example in the case of the CEO of McDonald's. For Steve Easterbrook, though his relationship with his employee was consensual, he was dismissed for “violating company policy” and showing “poor judgment”. There are a number of high profile cases that led to job losses due to office romance. Another example is Chipmaker Intel's chief executive Brian Krzanich who stepped down in June 2018 because he had contravened company rules by having a consensual relationship with an employee.

A peer-reviewed paper published in Management Research (Pierce and Aguinis, 2003), enticingly titled “Romantic Relationships in Organizations: A Test of a Model of Formation and Impact Factors”, reported that office romances are potentially good for business: participation in a romantic relationship with a colleague was significantly associated with job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. In the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Chan-Serafin and colleagues reported that ‘hierarchical workplace romances’ (i.e. sleeping with the boss) can be highly disadvantageous to junior employees. Contrary to the common trope of people using sex as a way to climb the career ladder, these studies showed that junior participants in power-imbalanced office relationships were less likely to be selected for training opportunities and promotions. Interestingly, and perhaps also at odds with expectation, they also found that negative career ramifications were more severe for men in relationships with female superiors than women involved with male superiors. Becoming involved with the boss is not only a career risk – it can affect your working relationships with other colleagues. A series of studies by Sean Horan and Rebecca Chory, reported in Psychology Today, explored how people would feel about their coworker dating a superior. Employees indicated that they would trust them less, felt they had less credibility, and would even be more inclined to lie to them. These feelings were stronger if the coworker was female. The same results were found for heterosexual and gay relationships.

Looking at the implications, one might be wondering why then do people continue to be involved in

workplace relationships. Well, the answer could be as put by Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., President and CEO of SHRM, “Because so much of our waking time is spent at work, it’s no surprise that romances develop in the workplace.” Social Psychologists conducted an experiment whereby they found that mere exposure to someone can increase our attraction to them. To illustrate this, they conducted an experiment whereby they showed college students photos of faces. Participants saw the photos of some faces up to 25 times, while other faces were only shown once or twice. The more the participants had seen a photo of a particular face, the more they reported liking it. In other words, the more one is constantly exposed to a certain face in the workplace the likely that some form of attraction will take place. In another survey conducted, 41% of employees indicated that they did not know their company’s policy regarding office romances.

Movements such as the #Me too movement were aimed at discouraging employees from engaging in office romance but almost three in four would participate in an office romance again if given a chance. This goes to show that office romance is not going to end and organisations ought to find ways to manage it. Clearly, there are pros and cons associated with being romantically involved with a coworker – the negatives being potentially much more severe if there is a power disparity. For peers dating peers, the picture looks rosier: colleagues do not show the same levels of mistrust, there are less negative career implications, and, if the relationship is solid, there are advantages in enhanced teamwork and productivity. Nonetheless, anyone engaging in even the happiest of office romances must be prepared for gossip, distraction, and the potential drama should the loving couple break up.

So the question is what organisations can do to handle the issue of office romance. Firstly let us look at how big names such as Google, Amazon and Facebook are handling the issue of office romance:

According to a Google spokesperson, the company strongly discourages employees from involving themselves in relationships with colleagues that they manage or report to, or if there is any question whether one individual has power over the other. The search giant has moved employees to different roles in the event that the latter does occur. Google provides regular training to executives in order to best address the topic. As of 2013, the company updated its policies to require all vice presidents and above to disclose any inter-office relationships that might have a conflict of interest attached to the company’s general counsel and People Operations department.

As for Amazon, the company does not have any strict policy about office romances unless there is a conflict of interest, for example, managers must disclose relationships with direct reports.

Facebook as guidelines regarding workplace relationships, “We train that if you ask a co-worker on a date and they say no, you don’t get to ask again -- and beyond that, we make it clear that an ‘I’m busy’ or ‘I can’t that night’ is a ‘no’,” said Heidi Swartz, the company’s global head of employment law. Facebook has internal "Managing a Respectful Workplace" training sessions in which the nuances of employee interactions and what is considered to be appropriate behavior are examined. For example, Swartz says they make sure to discuss examples such as “Someone telling a coworker: ‘nice dress.’ The group discusses the different ways this comment can be perceived based on the tone of voice, and frequency of use.”

So it is important for organizations to ensure that there are clear policies that outline the companies' stance when it comes to issues of office romance. Not only should there be written guidelines but these should be well communicated to all employees. Having a policy in place will help guide employees to know the conduct expected when there is an issue of office romance. To help encourage an environment where business can operate as usual around the natural social relationships formed between colleagues, providing training to managers and HR on office romance is advisable.

Giving time to employees who want to discuss confidential subjects is important. It gives you a clear understanding of the happenings in your team. Turning a blind eye won't solve anything. Relationships can turn sour and you should be on the lookout to protect your employees and the business.

As for employees before engaging in an office romance there are certain things that one must consider as outlined in an article by Harvard Business Review:

1. **Know the risks-** before you act on your feelings, it's important to think through the risks. Of course, there's the chance that the relationship won't work out and that there will be hurt feelings on one or both sides. There are also potential conflicts of interest. There are also reputational risks. "Your professionalism may be called into question," says Baker, "especially if people don't see your motives for entering the relationship as positive." Some colleagues may think you're giving your romantic partner preferential treatment or vice versa.
2. **Have the best intentions-** If you're aware of these risks and still want to move forward, research shows that your intentions matter. According to Amy Nicole Baker, an associate professor of psychology at the University of New Haven and author of several papers on workplace romance, "studies show that coworkers are generally positive if they perceive that you're falling in love and genuinely care about each other." So, before you jump in, check your motives and consider how others will perceive them. Having positive intentions at the start may also help guard against hurt feelings and misunderstandings should the romance eventually end.
3. **Know your company's policies-** Many companies prohibit employees from dating coworkers, vendors, customers, or suppliers, or require specific disclosures, so be sure to investigate before you start a relationship.
4. **Stay away from your boss and your direct reports-** According to research it is advised for one to avoid dating their manager or subordinate. According to Baker, "We know from research that the outcomes aren't as good; the perceptions are more negative."
5. **Don't hide it-** It is best to be open once one is involved in an office romance. According to Art Markman, a professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Texas at Austin, "You don't have to tell them after the first date, but letting people know reduces the awkwardness" and increases the likelihood that they'll be positive about the relationship. Besides, "if you don't tell anybody, people will still figure it out," he says. Make sure that your manager is one of the first to be informed.
6. **Set boundaries-** While you want people to know what's going on, you don't have to subject them to your relationship. Baker and her colleagues did research on flirting at work and found in two different studies that "People who frequently witness flirting... report feeling less satisfied in their jobs, and they feel less valued by their company. They're more likely to give a negative appraisal of the work environment, and they may even consider leaving," she says. One ought to

open with their partner on the possible risks or consequences that will come with dating in the workplace and preparing each other for such.

Therefore, romance is expected in the workplace. Finding ways to increase the positives and decrease the negatives caused is the secret to success for businesses.

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