

## What you need to know about office romance

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Office romance is the involvement in a romantic relationship between two members of the same organization with similar or different classification. This can be defined as a relationship where mutual desire and yearning for each other exists.

People who work together, sometimes end up in a romantic situation. Due to the long hours that co-workers spend with one other, they tend to get to know the other person pretty well and there is often little free time outside work to meet other people, so it makes sense that personal feelings also grow

For many, the office is where people tend to meet their spouses or significant others, says XpertHR (2019) on workplace romance. However, if these feelings are not treated properly, they can interfere with business . Also, legitimate business concerns can arise because of the potential negative effects of workplace relationships.

According to a survey conducted by Vault (2018), 58 per cent of employees surveyed have engaged in office romance. And as workers get older, the likelihood of participating in such a workplace relationship increases: 72% of workers age 50 and older reported having at least one romantic workplace relationship during their career. Famous couples who met at work include Barack and Michelle Obama, Bill and Melinda Gates. Almost three in four (72%) would participate in an office romance again if given the chance.

According to a 2018 survey by Harvard Business Review, the issues involved are likely to be familiar ones for many of us. 40% of respondents said that they had dated a coworker; 30% said they had enjoyed a one-night stand with someone from the office, and almost half of all office romances lead to marriage. Meanwhile, the 2018 Vault Office Romance Survey found that only 4% of people found the idea of being involved with a colleague entirely unacceptable, but many voiced a note of caution: almost half of the respondents were concerned about the ‘power issue’ of a relationship between employees at different levels. A third believed that it would be problematic for colleagues working together on the same projects to be in a relationship.

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. More recently, in a 2015 paper in the Journal of Managerial Psychology, Doll and colleagues reported that the likelihood of being open to office romance is predicted by an interaction between the organization’s relationship policy, and the level of conscientiousness of the individual concerned.

Because not every fling, love affair, hook-up, or even one-night stand can end amicably, the study found

that 9% of those surveyed were forced to leave their job due to "irreconcilable relations" with the co-worker they were once bedding. Also, 6% reported losing their job, as in being fired, because of their affair with a co-worker.

## **Types of office romance**

Each office romance is different, but social scientists point to many basic types, each of which is likely to affect business operations differently.

### 1. Extra-Marital affairs

This kind of relationship has a huge effect on the workplace, but the effects of extramarital affairs are often felt most profoundly in the homes of those involved even though they can also take a significant toll in the office too.

According to research by Lori Hollander (2011), 85% of affairs begin in the workplace. This usually happens because the workplace provides opportunity and proximity to people outside your family, hence the workplace is the most common place affairs start. Extramarital affairs, when exposed, frequently result in marriage breakdown, 65% of marriages end. This results in serious havoc in the relationship between a worker (or a business owner) and relationship with children, living arrangements, state of mind, etc. Meanwhile, these affairs will cause significant morale and productivity problems within the workplace.

### 1. Flings

Flings are short-lived relationships. The consequences of such behaviour can differ tremendously within an organization, depending on the emotions and goals of the members involved, their "post-fling" attitudes, and the degree to which the fling becomes common knowledge, either within the office or in their personal lives (especially when a spouse is involved). Some flings can transpire without any ill effects, while others — especially if the owner of a small business is directly involved — can cause serious damage to a company.

### 1. Relationship between Peers

Office romances among colleagues in a business — whether they are business partners or entry-level employees — do not pose the same dangers as boss / subordinate relationships, but they are not risk-free. Romances that end badly can lead to a tense environment in the workplace, a loss of productivity, and even, in some cases, the resignation of valued employees.

### 1. Relationship between Supervisors and subordinates

Employers may not like workplace romance, yet research shows that 22% of workers have dated their boss (Joanne Richard, 2018), up from 15% in 2017. However, 43% find the relationship between co-workers at different levels unacceptable (Vault, 2018). For the subordinates, these relationships are often

a lose-lose situation. When they receive rewards and recognition—whether they are deserved or not, other employees will resent them. 40% of employees complain about favouritism among co-workers in romantic relationships. And if the couple breaks up, it'll be almost impossible for the subordinate to stick around. 22% of workers have dated their boss (2018), up from 15% in 2017.

In the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2016), Chan-Serafin and colleagues reported that 'hierarchical workplace romances' (i.e. sleeping with the boss) can be highly detrimental 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.

### 1. Long-Term Relationships

Most people—small business owners, managers, and employees alike—enter into office romances in the hopes of building a long-term relationship with the other individual, and in some instances, this can take place. "This relationship," wrote Levesque, is "the one everyone admires and hopes ...will flourish into a permanent, meaningful bond."

#### **Dealing with Office romance.**

A study into workplace flings (Reboot Digital Marketing, 2019) has revealed that 46% of employers state that they would prefer their staff not to date each other.

However, most companies operating today recognize that attempts to neutralize or forbid office romances are probably doomed to failure. "Concerns about invading individuals' privacy, as well as the recognition that, human nature being what it is, people are going to get involved with their co-workers no matter what their companies dictate hence lead to some employers throw up their hands in despair," noted Judy Greenwald in *Business Insurance*. Nonetheless, with almost 72% of employees now interested in an office romance, organisations need to step up and guide employees through the relationship process.

In the reboot Digital Survey, 48% said they will date a fellow employee at some point in their professional lives, despite nearly half of employers discouraging workplace dating. One problem with a newly developing romance in the workplace is that unwanted shows of affection in the office will surround it. This, in effect, can cause many people an unpleasant atmosphere, and certainly poses a less than professional image. An organisation can resolve this issue by establishing an on-the-job code of conduct that explicitly addresses a professional work environment and forbids "public display of affection."

The first step towards resolving potential office romances is to develop a set of policies and procedures. Having a strategy in place and a procedure set out for the romantic partners to follow when their workplace relationship starts will help prepare management for any future problems and cover to the

fullest extent possible the bases of the company. Having well-developed policies is important, but it is equally important that the policies are communicated to employees and that managers are thoroughly trained on how to handle sexual harassment complaints. 45% agreed that there is an office romance policy in their organisation (Vault.com, 2018).

However, almost half (41%) of employees don't know their company's policy regarding office romances (Kim Elsesser, 2019). This is evidence that organizations are not serious when it comes to romance at work. Those organizations that do have policies aren't communicating them effectively, and in fact, 20% of employees in the Vault survey reported that they do not have a policy regarding office romance at all. If more than half of the workforce has engaged in a workplace romance, it's critical that the organization guide employees on how to go about professionally pursuing romance.

### **Actions to consider when making an Office romance policy;**

- State what is not acceptable

Define precisely what kinds of relationships will be and won't be accepted in the program. Many experts in the human resource industry propose policies that prohibit managers from dating a direct report. Policies should also note that workers are supposed to act respectfully, and that romantic attempts should be kept out of the working environment.

- Make Penalties Clear

Describes what measures should be taken if the policies are breached — transfer, demotion, termination.

- Encourage Open Communications

Try asking workers to report a relationship if it turns romantic. It can be a difficult task for workers if the punishments are serious for such a connection. When, on the other hand, the organization can partner with the couple then they are more likely to express their participation in a manner that is acceptable.

- Show Respect for Privacy

Do not overstep the boundaries of employee privacy. A company needs to make it clear that workplace performance is its primary concern.

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