



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

WORKING CLOSELY

It's that time of the year again, isn't it? The season to be jolly, with all the obligatory office parties being organised but let me sound a word of caution – curb the alcohol intake. It's human nature that when the booze starts flowing, the hormones and testosterone levels do too and many an office romance has been sparked by a quick kiss under the mistletoe at the annual Xmas beano.

A new survey has found that the majority of human resources experts consider office romances bad for business. Sixty-two per cent of respondents to the survey by Croner Consulting, one the UK's leading providers of business advice and consultancy, said they thought that office relationships negatively affect productivity at work. And don't think workplace 'bumping-uglies' is not widespread. hrwebcafe.com reports that office affairs are increasing, Their poll showed that 4 out of 10 workers admit to having an office romance with another colleague at some point in their careers. Another survey conducted by money.cnn.com revealed that in an online poll of 800 respondents, 72 percent of men and 60 percent of women admitted to being infatuated with a co-worker. When it came to revealing their feelings for their crush or acting on it, 34 percent of the women said they might do something, while 40 percent of the men would consider making a move.

According to the Washington Journal the hottest singles scene in the U.S. today is the workplace and there are a number of factors in the modern economy that have contributed to this –businesses are demanding longer work hours, resulting in a decline in free time for employees to socialise outside, people working together tend to have similar backgrounds, talents, and goals and of course there are now more women are in the workplace than ever before, even in the armed forces where both sexes not only work but live in very close proximity to one another. And the workplace, where people have a chance to get to know one another well over a period of time, is a lot safer place to meet someone than picking up a stranger in a bar or even finding someone online. Work is one of the most common places to meet your significant other - I personally know of many couples who met at their place of work and studies estimate conservatively that 25% of romantic relationships which begin at work lead to marriage - Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are a high-profile case in point!

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The trick is to not let it become a distraction. People who are truly serious about their careers want to be seen as thinking about business first, especially while at work. By having a romantic relationship in the office, there's a clear and present danger of taking your eyes off the prize and fixing them on the person in the next cubicle instead

And for the employer there can be dire consequences and risks associated with allowing workplace romances. Often times office romances set a company up for conflicts within the organization, such as complaints about favouritism, lower productivity, and even legal liabilities, including the dreaded sexual harassment suit. There can also be collusion to the serious detriment of the employer. American retail giant Wal-Mart recently took two senior marketing officials to court, claiming in a court filing that there were signs of an affair between Julie Roehm and Sean Womack who were selecting new ad agencies for the chain. Wal-Mart says they accepted outside gifts, used trips for personal time together, and sought jobs with one of the ad agencies, Draft FCB, which they ultimately recommended. Wal-Mart subsequently fired both of them, and was sued by Julie Roehm for unlawful termination. Wal-Mart countersued and claims that it has e-mail messages intimating signs of an affair sent by Roehm and Womack, both of whom are both married to other people. Roehm has denied Wal-Mart's accusations of an office romance, and says she did not have job discussions with Draft FCB and the case continues. Whilst this appears to be a case of 'he said, she said and Wal-Mart said', it also sends out warning signals to employers about the advisability and possible consequences of relationships in the workplace.

So what do you do when you suspect a bit of office hanky panky, a case of inter-departmental co-operation too far? Recognising the potential problem many companies have developed relationship policies in order to discourage workplace romances. Some firms are making employees sign 'love contracts' that oblige them to report relationships with other members of staff, while others are trying to ban office romances altogether. This is pretty funny... like anyone can stop it from happening, whether it be a quick fumble behind the filing cabinet or a real life, hearts and flowers labour of love. Attempts to curb workplace relationships are bound to be futile. Office romances are like the stealing of office stationery - everyone acknowledges it goes on, the powers-that-be don't approve and try and keep it down to a minimum but you can never eliminate it altogether. It's simply unrealistic because instead of it stopping the practise those relationships go "underground," out of the purview of the employer. When this happens, employers lose the ability to properly monitor and manage the situation. It's like everything else in the workplace - you can't force behaviour, you can only instil certain values and principals

As I said the problem is widespread - apparently even Santa is fuming mad as every time he leaves the workshop the elves start making whoopee instead of toys... serves him right for letting them spike the punch at the grotto party. And what was he thinking when he let them hang mistletoe all over the workshop? On the other hand he might have faced a complete 'down tools' if he'd insisted on serving soft drinks only so what's an employer to do? Might I suggest a new trend - the hen and stag separate seasonal celebration. It won't guarantee celibacy or sobriety but at least it'll take the problem outside!

