

## Bulletin Board: To date or not to date in the office

by Amy\_Winter

Love is in the air. That is in the workplace. Due to longer hours in the office and less time to go out and meet potential dates, professional men and women may seek relationships with co-workers. Although both might have similar interests and see each other on a daily basis, it can be challenging to be co-workers as well as lovers.

Office dating isn't highly encouraged by companies, especially if the relationship ends sour. Careerbuilder.com provides tips to those workers who feel a spark and want more than an office friendship:

- Create an exit plan. Before beginning the relationship, think about the consequences if it ends. Will you be able to handle seeing this co-worker every day after you break up?

- Steer clear of dating your subordinate. A conflict of interest arises when a manager dates one of his or her employees. Fellow employees may accuse the manager of giving the certain employee special treatment.

- Keep your love life private. The relationship should only occur between the two persons. Wait a month or two to tell the other employees about the relationship; it gives the two an opportunity to see if their romance has a chance.

- Save public displays of affection for after hours. Signs of affection may make other co-workers feel uncomfortable in the workplace.

- Avoid e-mail love letters. Don't write inappropriate love letters while at work. Managers may have access to e-mails on the company systems.

- Leave your love problems at home. Try to keep your love life outside of the workplace. You don't want relationship problems affecting your performance at the office.

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OFFICE ROMANCES MEDIATED

Could "love contracts" be the solution to keeping office relationships from disrupting the workplace? Barbara Reeves Neal says relationships develop due to increased emphasis on office teamwork as well as searching for reassurance from co-workers during stressful times. But what happens when a relationship ends? How can companies prevent retaliation due to a bad breakup?

Relationships in the office are normal, but the issue is how to make a rule that manages human behavior in the workplace.

"Romantic and/or sexual relationships disrupt the normal dynamic of the workplace, whether they are going well or going sour," says Neal, a mediator and arbitrator with JAMS: The Resolution Experts. "They may lead to lost productivity, jealousy, dysfunctional supervision or lawsuits."

Neal explains that love contracts, which officially say two co-workers are a couple, have become the companies' answer to dealing with office relationships. These contracts recognize the relationship as well as protect the company from a possible suit if the relationship ends on bad terms. They also prevent sexual harassment when both parties agree the relationship is mutual.

"Many employers have turned in recent years to love contracts, or agreements signed by employees after becoming involved in a relationship, to acknowledge the consensual nature of the relationship," says Neal.

Employees need to know that their company offers love contracts. Neal recommends employers put the contract sheets in the employee manual. Employees could then sign an agreement that they read the manual and understand the employer should be contacted if an office relationship develops.

Although contracts seem influential, they don't tackle the worst problem: employees having affairs or non-consensual office relationships. These types of relationships won't be reported to the company managers.

Neal recommends a neutral third party as a better solution for managers dealing with office romances. A hotline number or mediator can explain options and consequences of office relationships to employees in a more confidential and unbiased method. And possibly reduce the chance of office gossip.

"There are less intrusive ways to solve the same potential problems, such as an early mediation approach," says Neal. "A neutral third party mediator can work to quickly resolve issues developing from personal relationships in the workplace, in the most private of circumstances. This can restore the productivity of the

workplace most efficiently for the benefit of all parties."

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