

**The New York Times**

# Courtship Among the Cubicles: Proceed With Caution

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: October 8, 2009

**Filed at 2:46 p.m. ET**

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- Out of sight, out of mind. So seems to be the approach that many corporations take when it comes to workplace romances.

Still, while the spotlight put on David Letterman's dalliances with staffers may have been surprising because of who was involved, research shows most of us are no strangers to office relationships. They're a frequent occurrence that's often tolerated even though they can make us uncomfortable.

Recent surveys show that as many as four in 10 workers have been involved in a romance at work and a large majority of workers say they have observed an office fling at some point.

It seems that most of us don't mind people hooking up at work, but there are a few exceptions.

"If it's a peer relationship and it's perceived to arise from love, people are generally OK with it," says Amy Nicole Salvaggio, a psychology professor at the University of New Haven. "With a boss and a subordinate or if one is married, it gets a very negative reaction."

Salvaggio, who studies work place romances, says few companies proactively deal with relationships among workers, apparently concluding it's no one else's business. In her research, when workers are asked how their companies handle co-worker relationships, the most frequent answer is they ignore it. When asked whether their company has a policy, most workers said they didn't know.

## EMBRACING LOVE

Some companies support dating.

Take Southwest Airlines, where love apparently is in the air.

The company's home base is Love Field in Dallas. Its stock market ticker symbol is LUV.

And the company says that among its 35,000 workers, 2,000 are married to one another. Many met at work.

"It's all about making your workplace an enjoyable one, not hiding anything, being open and just being mature about it," said spokeswoman Ashley Rogers. "It's not something that we discourage as long as the employees handle it in a mature manner."

A supervisor dating a subordinate wouldn't be encouraged, she says, but any situations that could present a problem are handled with transfers or taken care of through open communication.

It's not that harmonious for all companies, though.

## WHEN LOVE BITES

Sometimes co-worker relationships can end badly for the front office. Many may recall Boeing Co. CEO Harry Stonecipher was forced out in 2005 after the company's board learned the married 68-year-old was having an affair with a lower-level executive.

More recently, in November 2007, American Red Cross President Mark Everson left after just six months on the job. The organization's board of governors cited his personal relationship with a subordinate. At the time, Everson was 53 and married with two children.

These examples and Letterman's alleged extortion case show that such relationships are fraught with trouble, says Anthony Haller, a labor lawyer with the Philadelphia office of Blank Rome.

An outright ban on dating is probably overkill, but companies should at least have policies against relationships between managers and subordinates, says Haller.

Even when a relationship appears consensual, court cases frequently hinge on whether it was welcomed by both parties. That's the finding of a 1986 U.S. Supreme Court ruling which established a new legal standard in sexual harassment cases -- whether the subordinate welcomed the relationship or felt pressured to participate because it was the boss being amorous.

Haller tells tempted managers they're flirting with disaster.

"The problem is your putting yourself in a position of complete vulnerability to what that person says, feels, and does after the affair ends," says Haller.

## JUST DON'T DO IT

One corporate leadership training expert puts it quite bluntly to executives and managers.

"Just don't do it," says Peter Handal, CEO of Dale Carnegie & Associates. "I would argue that you can't have a purely 100 percent consensual relationship."

If you're involved with someone reporting to you, subtle and perhaps subconscious pressure to play favorites is likely.

Whether it exists or not, favoritism is frequently perceived by other workers.

If such a relationship develops, somebody needs to be transferred, says Handal.

"Failing that," he says, "one of them has to leave."

It's not unusual for executives or managers to succumb to temptation, but it's much more common for companies to find that two peers have struck up a personal relationship.

And few experts say companies should try to stop it.

"It's perfectly appropriate in a lot of situations," says Handal.

As long as the employees are discreet and acting professionally, there are few worries.

If they work in the same department, he suggests they let their manager know about the relationship.

## ROMANCE RULES

Haller, the labor lawyer, advises companies to have a written policy that prohibits relationships between supervisors and their direct employees.

Still a recurring problem is that companies with a formal policy often fail to let workers know what it is.

Managers and human resources staff should operate as coach and counsel to workers about dating, says John Heins, the chief human resources officer at Spherion Corp., a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., staffing and recruiting company.

They should tell workers clearly what the policies are and the consequences for violating them.

Informality invites problems. "You don't want them to be the romance cop and whack people over the head when they see something happening," says Heins.

Companies also should have a process in place for investigating relationships when concerns develop to immediately determine whether they are consensual and welcome by both parties.

## KNOW WHEN TO HOLD 'EM

Some very common sense advice for workers who fall in love comes from business etiquette expert and author Barbara Pachter.

She says don't hold hands or kiss, don't e-mail love notes or cards and don't have intimate phone conversations because you may be overheard.

Business rules should apply even in social situations like office parties. That means don't dance too close, drink too much or wear seductive clothing.

If the relationship ends, behave professionally.

It might also be wise to understand that an interoffice relationship may affect those around you.

Salvaggio, the New Haven psychology professor recently completed a research project that produced some surprising results.

Workers who see office romances report job dissatisfaction in higher numbers.

It's not clear why.

"It's the opposite of what I expected," she says. "I don't have enough knowledge to speculate now on what causes it."

It illustrates the primary reason companies should pay attention to courtship among the cubicles.

Workers focusing on anything other than their jobs may be distracted and those nearby might not be so happy about it all. It can affect productivity.

The trick is managing it and keeping it from blowing up in your face.

Ask anyone who works on "The Late Show With David Letterman."