

Office romances fraught with complications; Maturity in the workplace a key to their success

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The office cubicle is no place to hide from Cupid's arrow.

Workplace romances are remarkably common, but they can create complications, both for the couple involved and the employer.

A 2006 survey by career website Vault.com pegged the number of Americans who've dated a co-worker at 58 percent. Similar studies by Harris Interactive and the Society for Human Resource Management/CareerJournal.com found a more modest yet still impressive 41 percent and 40 percent, respectively.

Relationship specialists advise people to be extra careful about balancing the demands of an ongoing relationship with the day-to-day grind of a career. It's a situation that calls for maturity.

"Get to know the person. Be darn sure you know what you want to do before you pull that trigger," said Paul Falzone, 49, chief executive of the Right One, a local dating service. Falzone should know: He met his future wife when she began working for him.

"Make sure you're both mature enough that if it doesn't work out, [you can] discuss it and say, 'Hey, I'm going to look you in the eye at the watercooler, and I hope you'll be cool with it,'" Falzone said.

Once established, couples should be careful about leaving their personal life at home. Maintain a professional appearance at work. Companies aren't paying you to fall in love, and by carrying yourselves seriously around the office you eliminate the perception that you're more focused on each other than on work.

"We just tried to act as professional as we could," Sara Russell, 27, a documentation manager at Cisco Systems in Boxborough, said of the beginning of her relationship with her husband, John, 28, a Cisco engineer.

"Every now and then you catch yourself doing things - like, we'd notice that we'd stand too close while we were getting coffee ... and be like, 'Oh, you know, that probably was weird.'"

And maybe even not allowed. Before you enter into a workplace relationship, consult the company handbook on love. According to a 2006 Society for Human Resource Management/ CareerJournal.com poll, one in every four companies discourages or bans office dating out of fear such relationships could negatively affect productivity, create favoritism issues, or lead to sexual harassment. Penalties for dating co-workers often include formal reprimands, counseling, or termination.

According to that same poll, 80 percent of human resource professionals said companies should not tolerate relationships between a supervisor and subordinate.

Moreover, some firms separate couples by transferring one member of the pair - so unless you're prepared to pack up and head to the Ottawa office, make sure you know what you're getting into before you lean in for that first smooch.

Most employers realize, however, their seldom-read manuals cannot top one of the most elemental powers in nature.

"Employers can't pretend that people are going to completely separate their [love] lives and their workplace lives," said Jay Shepherd, principal at Shepherd Law Group, a Boston firm serving businesses with employee disputes. "You just need to be smart about it and keep your eyes open for problems."

Companies also don't like it when couples split up. Failed workplace relationships can lead to productivity problems, lawsuits, and harassment claims, Shepherd said.

Ariel Shoemaker and her husband, Brian, taught together for a year at a middle school in Newton, designed curriculum during a summer, and also run Ariel's art business, Rufus Magufis Mosaics, out of their home in Waltham.

"If you keep it professional between the two of you, no one can come back and say, 'Well, you were all distracted because of that person,'" said Ariel, 28, who now teaches private art classes.

Brian, who still teaches in Newton, said of their time together: "You just need to go to work and do your job right, and when you go home you can deal with other stuff."

This means when you have the inevitable fight, leave it at home. No one at the office wants to attend a meeting freighted with the tensions of a bickering couple.

An office relationship may also mask compatibility issues, problems that probably will surface over time.

"If the workplace foundation is all you have, that gets really old, really fast," said Dianne Blomberg, a workplace specialist based in Denver. "You end up being great work partners and terrible love partners."

Blomberg met her husband while he was temping in her office, and she also was his supervisor for more than a decade while they worked at a Colorado university. When she managed her husband, she refused to talk about work with him outside of the office to create a separation of their professional and private lives.

Some couples may not need such a strict division, however. The Russells said they enjoy discussing work when not on the clock.

"We both spend so much time here that if you don't talk about work at all ... I mean that's just a huge part of your life that you don't talk about," John Russell said. "It's not all we talk about, but we don't say, 'We're not going to talk about this.'"

And, in an era in which people switch jobs frequently, your office romance may eventually become nothing more than a relationship between former colleagues.

Falzone, the dating service owner who began working with his wife in 1989, laments the loss of her as a co-worker.

"She was my best manager," he said, adding jokingly, "The biggest mistake I ever made was marrying her and having children and losing my best manager."

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