

Rules of Romance at Work: Who's the Boss?

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Dedicated to the marriage of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Vandenberg, a prime example of how romance sparked in the workplace.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenology examines how work-related dating is currently perceived. Business to business relationship management in the United States primarily focuses on the macro-level relationships between businesses and their employees on a business level. Companies routinely romance each other in order to make the sale. Such a relationship is like a date, with the goal of romantic partnership. Just as larger business to business or sales partnerships have been studied, dating relationships among employees need to be examined at the micro level. As a result of this need, this research focuses on policies discouraging dating relationships between employees as a sector of relationship management. Eight million relationships a year begin at the workplace, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (Society for Human Resource Management, 2002). However, these employees often find themselves in conflicting situations between business versus romantic relationships. Organizational romance is a relationship between two members of the same organization that is perceived by a third party to be characterized by sexual attraction (Quinn, 1980). The researcher defines workplace dating as time spent with a coworker, manager, or subordinate that has a mutual, pre-mediated romantic basis outside of the workplace. Because of potential problems, "it is advisable to have some written guidelines on workplace romances" (Schaefer, 2001). This researcher offers three questions to be considered by policy makers regarding workplace dating:

RQ1. *When* should there be a policy discouraging workplace dating?

RQ2. *Why* have such a policy?

RQ3. *Would* such a policy be taken seriously?

The researcher utilized Sternberg's (1986) triangle theory of love to analyze results from twenty-two in-depth interviews, which were coded in order to understand dating with in the workplace. Sternberg's theory (1986) consists of three components of love: intimacy, compassion and commitment. Interviewees revealed perceived advantages and disadvantages related to policies surrounding workplace dating. Managerial implications were then discussed, concluding that love acts as a barrier to business when romantic intimacy, passion and commitment surpass intimacy, passion, and commitment in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

"We live at work, how can we not date people that we work with?" (M, 22)

Dating at work is natural and logical for many people because it is difficult to find romance outside the workplace while working fifty hours or more per week (Burleigh, 2001). Today the average woman spends 1,584 hours in the office every year, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Statistics (2002). Given the hours both genders spend working, the workplace is an opportunity for sparking romance, making it no surprise that romance often begins at work. The workplace is the next opportunity to find a significant other, especially if one has not established a relationship in college (Powers, 1998). In today's corporate-driven society, the office is the new singles bar (Powers, 1998). Powers interviewed 150 people who had found love on the job. He questioned, "Where else are you going to find someone dressed up, putting their best foot forward?" A recent poll likewise stated that 52% of employees had been asked out by a colleague (Burleigh, 2001). There are many advantages to allow for dating at work. Dating in the workplace is a way of dating in a secure community; in the age of websites for dating and a host of singles groups, many seek a screening mechanism (Close, Zinkhan, and Peters, 2002). Shared workplace experiences foster mutual understanding of work. An advantage for employers occurs when employees put in more hours alongside a potential romantic partner, instead of employees rushing home after work (Schaefer, 2001).

Despite the advantages of dating in the workplace, downsides exist. For instance, there are no easy ways of avoiding each other if the date fizzles or romance never sparks (Mazier, 2001). In the workplace, interaction is inevitable, in the office itself or in

surrounding social situations. An ended workplace romance can also hurt the reputations of both individuals along with the company's reputation. In this era of relationship marketing, reputation determines many business decisions (Manierio, 1986). If ruining a reputation is not bad enough, careers suffer along with the reputations. This happens when colleagues view a promotion, departmental move, or raise as favoritism. If the relationship lasts, it can be difficult to work with a romantic partner (Leahy, 1999). Many situations present themselves as a choice between a decision that is best for business versus the romantic relationship (Dillard, 1987). However, the current study determined the decision an employee makes to date a coworker cannot easily be influenced by corporate policy.

This research examined the following research questions:

RQ1. *When* should there be a policy discouraging workplace dating?

RQ2. *Why* have such a policy?

RQ3. *Would* such a policy be taken seriously?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher reviewed literature relating to workplace romance roles, longevity, authority, consequences, and ended relationships. Dating in the workplace is not encouraged by Corporate America and is often discouraged through policies related to romance at work (Mazier, 2001). Most large companies historically barred coworkers from dating (Mazier, 2001). As more women entered the labor market in the 1960s, many prohibitions fell (Close, Zinkhan, and Peters, 2002). Currently, the proportion of women in management is now approaching half (Accipter, 2002). Office romances are becoming

increasingly accepted, especially during the early stages of a career (Burleigh, 2001).

"Twentysomethings are less prudish than their parents, and they know how to relate to each other better" (Burleigh, 2001). Better relations lead to happier working

environments, which are healthy for productivity and the employees (Powell, 1998).

This, however, does not mean workplace dating comes without career and personal risks.

One must begin dating within the workplace prepared to deal with potential obstacles in order to "have a career and date it too" (Powell 1998).

Working Role versus Romantic Role

According to G. Powell and S. Foley in their article "Something to Talk About: Romantic Relationships in Organizational Settings", corporate and individual's roles are discussed. The corporate climate is an important factor in determining whether employees disclose the occurrence of workplace dating (Powell, 1998). There are two aspects of relationships: personal and business. Americans have been socialized into thinking about romance and work as separate compartments of life (Powell, 1998). It is important to keep the two in perspective since they merge at some point (Powell, 1998). In reality, today's business environment revolves twenty- four hours a day, seven days a week and incorporates all components of the employee's life (Powell, 1998). In business meetings employees in dating relationships often have conflicting viewpoints, which can cause disagreements in the relationship (Powell, 1998). With the workplace rapidly becoming the top source of dates, foresight is critical for maintaining both a dating relationship and career (Powell, 1998).

Changing Times

Office romance rarely ends because of corporate policy, however policies change (Accipter, 2002). Workers have successfully challenged policies as an invasion of privacy. Under previous rules, Microsoft Corp. Chief Executive Bill Gates would have been unable to date his future wife (Accipter, 2002). Today, a majority of companies have little in the area of written policies concerning workplace romances. This practice is widely supported by consultants in human resources and management as well as executives. A recent *Fortune* magazine poll of 200 chief executives found that nearly 75 percent agreed that romantic relations between workers are "none of a company's business." (Accipter, 2002) Also according to the CEOs, almost eighty percent agreed their office romance was not the company's concern when the couple is discrete (Accipter, 2002).

Who's the boss?

According to the society for Human Resource Management's 1999 Workplace Romance Survey, seventy-two percent say their organizations do not have a written policy addressing workplace romance (Accipter, 2002). The word *written* is important; the study then finds that fourteen percent have an *unwritten* policy against dating (Accipter, 2002). Of these with an unwritten policy, fifty- five percent claim the policy "permits yet discourages workplace romances" (Accipter, 2002).

Consider the Consequences

There are consequences to a policy that regulates office romance; when coworkers have a relationship that is hidden from the company, awkwardness emerges (Maniero, 1986). Secrets can cause resentment among coworkers. Another seemed

reason for implementing a corporate anti- dating policy is that soured office relationships may result in sexual-harassment liability (Leahy, 1999). However, only 4 percent of human resource professionals report that claims of sexual harassment from a failed workplace romance led to litigation in the past five years. (Schaefer, 2001) SHRM's 1998 Workplace Romance Study reports that "out of the organizations that do have an office romance policy, eighty-eight percent say that it is a direct result of increased sexual harassment claims" (13). Sexual harassment suits have become so frequent that many corporations give employee seminars in order to reduce potential for litigation (Wright, 2000).

Ended Relationships

Contact proximity in a work environment is an influence on relationships. If interoffice relationships fizzle, employees still must face each other at work. Authors of "Predicting Social-Sexual Behavior at Work: A Contact Hypothesis" noted, "The sexualization of a work environment is associated with the amount of contact individuals have at work". (Gutek, 1990). Seventy-five percent of surveyed employers are concerned about consequences if the romance fizzles (Accipter, 2002). "If you decide to wander down that illicit path of meeting somebody in your office, remember to take the good with the bad." (Accipter, 2002).

METHOD

To explore workplace dating and policy implications, the researcher conducted an exploratory study of dating habits, stigmas and patterns in and outside of the workplace. That study consisted of two preliminary methods: 1) observation of perceived daters, and

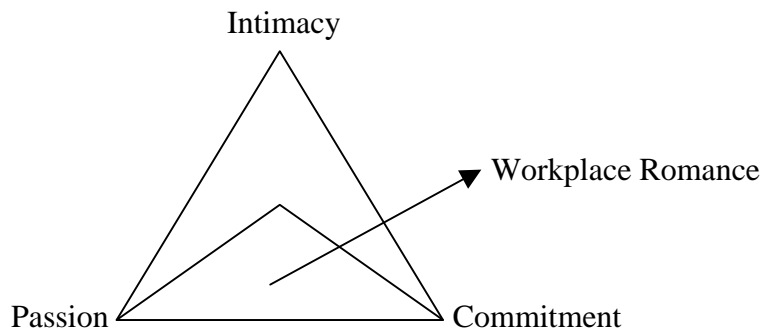
2) a focus group. Observations were conducted at a winery in a suburban town during the hours of nine to eleven in the evening. The focus group (n=12) comprised of college-aged singles, who are either active daters or outside of a committed relationship. The exploratory methods were useful in developing insight of dating prior to concentrating on dating in the workplace. To achieve triangulation, the author conducted interviews as the primary research method. Interviews were chosen because of the intimate nature of relationships, which is better shared on a one-to-one basis than in a focus group setting.

Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted among employed participants. The interviews were conducted among subjects including government professionals, teachers, and students. The researcher interviewed both genders, ranging from the age of 18 to 77, with the majority being 18-25. Interviews studied workers in major corporations as well as small businesses. The semi-structured, audio-taped interviews each lasted approximately 30-130 minutes. Each interview included a series of conversations on dating in the workplace. Transcripts of the twenty-two in-depth interviews were analyzed with axial and open coding techniques. The researcher then composed a categorical construction of the data, the breadth and the depth of each category. Each category, such as “work place dating policy advantages”, “disadvantages”, and “seriousness” was then reintroduced into conclusions. A final interpretation emerged from the process; while work-based relationships do intertwine with the job or career, a policy to regulate such will not be taken seriously when romantic intimacy, passion and commitment dominate intimacy, passion and commitment in the workplace.

THEORY

These interviews are analyzed in light of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. Sternberg's theory provides a perspective on loving relationships in general that the author applied to the formulation of dating relationships in workplace settings. Sternberg (1986) suggests that love be best understood in terms of three components that represent the points of a triangle. Intimacy, passion, and commitment represent the points on a triangle. Intimacy is defined as feelings of closeness. Passion is linked to the desire for sexual communication. Commitment is the decision that one loves and wishes to maintain that love (Sternberg, 1986). Figure one demonstrates an overlap in romantic and workplace relationships, which is represented by the overlap in the triangle.

Figure 1: Sternberg's Triangle Theory of Love



FINDINGS

When should there be a policy on workplace dating? Workplace dating is appropriate more in non-career oriented, seasonal, or part-time jobs in which the employee's priority lie outside of the job. One respondent in the fast-food industry claims, "I've heard of this going on with you not being able to date coworkers. I

understand why it's that way, but if I was that interested in a person, fast food jobs could be a dime a dozen, so I think I would just look for a new line of employment." (F, 22)

However, a more prestigious, career-oriented position has different implications to workers' ideas about dating in the workplace. When the conversation turned to dating higher management, her views quickly changed. She then stated, "It definitely becomes a bigger decision when you've got more at stake."

QUESTION: So you would cost/benefit analyze "what is it worth to date this person"?

ANSWER: Yes. I mean, if I spent my life trying to achieve a position career wise, and then I meet somebody that could put that in jeopardy, it's (dating at work) a much bigger decision.

The decision factor leads to the second research question.

2. Why or why not have such a policy?

There are advantages to establishing a policy for workplace dating. However, reasons not to date coworkers are determined by levels of responsibility to work versus the level of the romantic relationship. One interviewee (M, 26) stated the importance of the type of company and the levels of the individuals within the company.

ANSWER: It (workplace dating) depends on the level. I mean, if you're a direct coworker with someone, it's one thing. But if you're dating your boss, it becomes a different issue. I think it can improve the workplace situation if it's someone at the same level as you, but it can definitely cause problems if it's somebody you're supposed to report to.

QUESTION: What about the negative side effects of dating your coworker?

ANSWER: Definitely if you're dating somebody you have to report to, it puts a lot of pressure on them because then they're giving someone orders that they're in a relationship with and it causes major power issues... You don't want to get into it if you know those are going to be the consequences, so it's... something you have to weigh before you get into it.

Dating a coworker is not devoid of state and federal laws. An employee was fired from Wal-Mart for committing adultery with an employee; she successfully sued on the grounds that Wal-Mart violated employee privacy under New York law (Dworkin, 1997).

The interviewees feel choosing to date coworkers is a personal choice. Table one displays advantages to having a policy regulating workplace dating that emerged from the interviews. These downsides of dating at work include potential for sexual harassment, unfairness, and post-romance awkwardness. On the other hand, dating within the workplace has some advantages to the dater and to the business. When asked about these advantages, the in-depth interviews provide insight on these advantages.

QUESTION: Is it something that you think would facilitate a good environment (to date a coworker)?

ANSWER: I'm friends with pretty much everybody I work with. I love my job and everything, but I think that there could be a lot of tension if something happened. It would be a bad work environment and it would make people feel awkward. So I don't think that that's really a good idea. (F, 20).

QUESTION: How would you say dating improves the workplace?

ANSWER: Well, when you know somebody better, from the viewpoint of dating someone, you obviously know that person more intimately than other people would. So it's easier to communicate. You may not have to explain everything, because you know that they'll understand. Or you may know ahead of time how they will react to something, so it smoothes out some hurdles. (F, 25)

One is also willing to spend more time in the office when it is alongside romance.

QUESTION: What about time and rushing out of the workplace at 5:00 to go see your loved one?

ANSWER: You obviously don't have to if they're sitting in the desk next to you. So you might be persuaded to stay working longer and be less concerned about time. (F, 28)

In contrast to table one, table two displays the disadvantages of establishing a workplace dating policy. Table two shows benefits of dating at work, such as increased

camaraderie, increased hours on the job, and a deeper communication level among workers.

3. Would such a policy be taken seriously?

The theme that an anti workplace-dating policy would not be taken seriously emerged from the interviews. The intensity of potential romance exceeds the relationship between coworkers.

QUESTION: So if someone tells you that you can't date a certain person, what would be your reaction?

ANSWER: I'd... laugh, because it's based off of insensitivity. They just have one (a policy) to have an excuse to fire people. I mean, the impact of dating at work or not varies for different individuals and different companies. Rumors can start, but you get past those. I mean, those become the interesting part of the relationship.

Another subject agrees on the lack of necessity of a policy,

ANSWER: I don't really listen to dating policies too much. I mean, I hear it from people, but it doesn't really weigh into the decision of who you love. Not only would the policy not be taken seriously, it would cause forms of anger and resentment among the workers.

QUESTION: What would you say... if you couldn't go on a date with someone that you worked with?

ANSWER: It would make me mad. It (a dating ban) is not a policy between Sales Associates or anything, but the Managers and Sales Associates aren't supposed to fraternize. I'm really close with some of my Managers, but we can't do some things. For example, you could meet somewhere but we shouldn't go together unless it's a store-sponsored thing. (F, 20)

The interviewee is not even aware of the breadth of the policy. She knows, "There's a really fine line; I'm not really sure exactly what they (policies) are".

QUESTION: Could you...lose your job for going out to dinner and a movie for having romantic implications?

ANSWER: I don't know. I've never really worried about the policy so much, because I mean, it's never really been...enforced.

The advantages and disadvantages to dating in the workplace are shown below, in Tables

1 (disadvantages) and 2 (advantages).

Table 1: Disadvantages of Dating in the Workplace

Why Ban Workplace Dating?
Shows commitment to company over a significant other
Dating upper- lower levels causes problems
Creates awkwardness among coworkers
Policy upholds corporate image or laws
Failed relationships may cause unwanted turnover
Less pressure on appearance in the workplace
Policy limits sexual harassment

Table 2: Advantages of Dating in the Workplace

Why allow corporate dating?
Dating may promote camaraderie
More intimate understanding among workers
Increased or heightened productivity in effort to impress dating partner
Dating may promote carpooling to work
Free time none of company's business
Motivation to put in more hours at work alongside a potential date
Increased involvement at work
Policy causes frigid environment among workers
Encourages employees to remain polished in appearance
Attracts new, young, single employees as a relaxed work environment

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

Many management experts and companies remain supportive of policies that forbid romantic relationships between managers and their subordinates (Accipiter, 2002). Yet, policies banning dating in the workplace can undermine department morale and ruin careers. Corporations must create an atmosphere flexible enough to allow for workplace dating. The real challenge in a flexible environment is to limit sexual harassment

potential. A ban on dating, while it may reduce sexual harassment claims, will not prevent instances from occurring (Vincent, 2002). While it seems apparent that a failed office relationship primes sexual harassment claims, only four percent of HR professionals report that claims of sexual harassment from a failed workplace romance led to litigation in the past five years (Vincent, 2002).

Managers need to create an environment that recognizes that both relationships and conflicts will happen, and need to create a process that allows for avenues of optimum solutions (Schaefer, 2001). These solutions are alternatives to banning workplace dating. One solution is to effectively communicate employee information on what constitutes sexual harassment. Management consultants report facilitating communication is more effective than a ban on employees dating. "One of the best things that they can do is educate everybody, from new hire to CEO, about what harassment is and what it is not," according to a Los Angeles entertainment company that recently conducted seminars on sexual harassment for more than 2,000 of their employees (Schaefer, 2001). Another alternative to a policy banning romance is to encourage productivity; a happy worker is a productive worker. "The companies should be focused on employee work performance, not on what somebody is doing privately. For those companies that have restrictive policies, they should re-examine and retire them," said Karen Stephenson, a management professor at the Anderson School at UCLA (Vincent, 2002). An alternative to a policy banning office dating is to establish rules forbidding specifics such as closed-door meetings, overt displays of affection in the office, or a lack of focus on work. Companies may maintain a professional image by implementing rules

that couples leave both squabbles and public displays of affection at home (Vincent, 2002).

Managers should encourage individuals to establish communication on outcomes in the beginning. It is important for couples to handle working together if the togetherness crumbles. Even if the romance does last, the two may not continue to desire to be employed at the same department or even company (Vincent 2002). Instead of firing a manager for dating an otherwise productive subordinate, a company may transfer one or both employees to separate departments or territories if violations prevent the reaching of company potential. In lieu of a policy banning workplace dating, it is important to consider levels. For example, United Parcel Service of America takes seriously its policy prohibiting managers from dating non-management employees. "You don't want to give the perception that people got ahead by virtue of a relationship with someone else in the company," UPS spokesman Mark Dickens said (Accipter, 2002). They do not, however, have any other policy prohibiting coworkers, and have not reported any problems with this policy. Likewise, interviews suggest that the levels of policy or managerial seriousness must be accounted for. If a company or a manager is perceived as not being serious, any policy, especially workplace dating, will be taken for granted.

When feelings, dating and love are involved, the workplace often takes a back seat. It is often difficult to separate a career and love, and love often overcomes any prohibition. When one begins to develop romantic feelings for another at work due to the extended time spent together, priorities may change. One interviewee (F, 22) said, "You can't help who you love." You can, however control the way you show this affection and

attitude towards job duties. It comes down to basic economics. Employees weigh the opportunity cost of dating against losing their job. It is all how the employee views the benefit of the job over the other individual. How much does the job mean to the individual? While specific rules can benefit the organization and the dater, on the macro level romantic feelings will win over a corporate policy, which bans dating in the workforce. Managers and marketers should be aware; love conquers all- even policy. It appears that love is the real boss.

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