Love and HR: What We Don't Really Talk About!

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Office romances are frequent and generate much interest – there are more than 300,000,000 search results on Google about love in the workplace. We all enjoy a great office love story, like the one between Pam and Jim in *The Office*, or a nonfiction one like Bill and Melinda Gates. Or you may have read about Love in the Office or the psychological reasons why you fall in love with your colleagues. Overall, office romances are no unicorns – they do happen. It's no surprise that workplace romances are so common, with many people spending 40 hours a week or more with their coworkers. According to Vault's 2018 Office Romance Survey, office romances often begin between employees working in the same department, in close proximity to one another, or on a shared assignment. But.... there are a few love-related workplace topics that haven't gotten much attention and have remained hush, hush. So, as we celebrate Valentine's Day, we decided to finally address some of these "secret" topics no one really talks about.

When an Employee Has a Relationship with a Former Employee

OK, you might be thinking, "Why is this a problem? This person no longer works here, they should be fine dating each other." And with that, you are generally right! But here is the problem: what if that former employee happened to go work for one of your competitors? After all, many people continue to work within the same industry. Yikes! What do I hear?! Confidentiality issues, uhh ohh! How can you – as a human resources professional or manager – handle this situation, especially when it comes to the employee's job and the privacy rights of both the employee and the organization? There isn't a clear-cut guideline that should be followed, but I can tell you that violating employees' rights to freedom and privacy is definitely not the answer. There is the famous case of Rulon-Miller v. IBM, 1 IER Cases 405 (1984), where the plaintiff, an IBM employee named Virginia Rulon-Miller, was dating a former IBM employee that went to work for a competitor company. How did these star-crossed lovers' story end? According to Harvard Business Review, "The demotion [that Rulon-Miller received] was based on written company policy governing conflicts of interest. She quit and sued IBM for invasion of privacy and, in effect, wrongful discharge from her position." In the end, Rulon-Miller was awarded $300,000 in damages, and IBM could have accomplished what they needed to without violating her rights. If you fear that your employees might divulge any confidential information to your competitors, a proactive step you can take is ensuring your staff are aware of how crucial it is that your company's confidential information is protected. You can even take it a step further and include a confidentiality

agreement in your employee handbook and discuss such matters during employee orientation and meetings.

When an Employee Has a Romantic Relationship with a Client

It's true what they say: proximity often leads to attraction. Your employees might have regular interaction and communication with your clients and customers, and this can cause conflicts of interest if a romantic relationship sparks between them. "What can happen?" you ask. Due to a relationship between a client and an employee, the employee's judgment may be affected. Likewise, the client may expect special treatment and deals that other clients don't receive. To avoid any conflicts of interest, the relationship should be disclosed to human resources or management. Consider having a neutral party involved in dealing with the client. With another perspective, objectivity is more likely, and both the employee and client should feel safer from accusations of giving or receiving preferential treatment.

When an Employee Has a Romantic Relationship with a Vendor

This scenario is similar to an employee dating a client, and it can also potentially affect your organization. Your employees may also interact with other individuals that your organization does business with, like vendors and contractors. It's not wrong or illegal to date a client or vendor, but it's best to have a dating policy that can anticipate this situation in case any issues arise. If one of your employees is dating a vendor, they should disclose the relationship to management and HR in order to sort out any potential conflicts of interest. You want to guarantee that your organization is not perceived as exerting a business influence and that the relationship isn't harming efficient, fair, and lawful business practices. Additionally, and as previously mentioned, you should make sure that your employees understand they are responsible for protecting confidential information. In this type of scenario, any private information your employee shares could give their significant other's organization a business advantage over your organization or other vendors.

When Cupid's Spell Breaks

When office romances arise, human resources and both starstruck lovers not only have to watch out for compliance issues but also another big factor: gossip! Based on a study published in the journal Sex Roles, women tend to be the target of that gossip more than men. Gossip can waste time, foster distrust and dissatisfaction, and lead to accusations of favoritism and that promotions were due to certain relationships. Gossip at this stage can become a means of undermining other individuals and can get even worse if the relationship doesn't work out. When your employee and former employee break up, it can open the door to gossip that might damage your employee's reputation and bring about legal issues and retaliation. The same can occur when a relationship between your employee and a client or vendor ends. That is why it's imperative for both parties to disclose their relationship to

avoid any issues in the future. In the end, we all know and should understand that Cupid's spell doesn't always work out. While there are plenty of pieces of wisdom and articles about relationships between coworkers and how HR should deal with them, there is not nearly as much out there that addresses the circumstances we have here. Consider preparing your company's policies for these situations should they arise, if you haven't already. When crafting such policies, you should consider the following:

- Could the relationship pose a conflict of interest?
- Is there a difference of power at play? Could the relationship have the potential to be considered coercive or quid-pro-quo? Is there any risk for an allegation of sexual harassment?
- Could the relationship reflect upon the company or stakeholder poorly or unprofessionally?

Having such policies is essential for avoiding conflicts of interest and ensuring the brand and image of your organization are upheld. Once these measures are in place, Cupid's arrows can fly more easily.

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