Will They, Won't They: Relationships in the Office

If you're currently in a relationship with a coworker – or maybe on the cusp of a new one – be aware both of your own company's policies around office relationships, and of your own behavior.

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When you think of workplace romances, one of the first couples that come to mind is, of course, Jim Halpert and Pam Beesly from NBC's comedy *The Office*. Their love story was one everyone loved to watch. But although their relationship usually gets the spotlight, Jim and Pam are only one of seventeen different couple combinations (yes, we counted) that occur within the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company over the course of the show. For a relatively small company, that number seems a little unrealistically high – but this is fiction, right? Actually, *The Office's* romance ratios may be closer to fact than you'd guess. CareerBuilder's recently released annual Valentine's Day survey for 2018 revealed that 36 percent of workers have dated a coworker at some point – and 31% of those office romances have resulted in marriage. Not too surprising - after all, most of us spend the majority of our time at work. In honor of Valentine's Day 2018, let's take a look at some common questions around workplace romances and finding love (or heartbreak) in the office.

Why (and when) do employees get together?

According to Vault's 2017 Office Romance Survey, office romances most commonly have their beginnings among employees who work in the same department or who work in cubicles or offices close to one another. I guess it's true what they say – proximity breeds attraction! Proximity's not the only factor, however; one of the biggest causes of office romance is a shared mutual purpose that arises from working day in and day out toward the same goals. Whether those goals are pranking Dwight as much as possible or, in the case of Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, hosting a highly successful morning news show, striving for those same goals can be a deep bonding factor, according to relationship expert Dr. Carmen Harra. Vault also revealed that happy hours and office parties tend to be other common sparks for an office romance. Makes sense, right? These types of events allow for more personal interactions between colleagues, as well as an open opportunity to talk about something other than work and get to know coworkers better.

Why *don't* employees get into relationships with coworkers?

On the flip side of Vault's 2017 survey, 41 percent of employees have deliberately avoided a potential workplace romance. Dating someone from your workplace certainly leaves you vulnerable to a

variety of potentially tricky situations, especially depending on the nature of your professional relationship with your new significant other. For example, a manager who begins to date a subordinate employee may be accused of nepotism – and in many cases, organizations will likely have nepotism policies in place that may impact the roles and employment of both halves of the couple. In other words, there's a strong chance that if a supervisor/subordinate relationship becomes romantic, one of the involved parties will need to change roles or leave to avoid a conflict of interest – in some cases, even if it's an indirect relationship. Another deterrent for many employees is the dreaded question no one wants to think about when they first enter into a relationship. We'd all love if every office relationship ended in a Niagara Falls wedding attended by your whole team – but let's go back to that stat from CareerBuilder. If 31 percent of office relationships end in marriage, there's a good majority that likely ends long before that option. So, what happens if you and your coworker-turned-significant-other break up? Besides creating an awkward work environment for the former couple, such a breakup could have a harsh impact on productivity, particularly if both people work on the same teams or interact frequently. Of course, that could also create an uncomfortable work environment for other coworkers around them, depending on the nature of the breakup. And of course, there's the six percent of employees who have left a job following a breakup with a colleague – not an ideal situation for the employee or the employer.

Dating in the office: what YOU need to know

It's important to be aware that while every company may have its own specific policy regarding dating in the workplace, many companies today still discourage or ban office romance – particularly between executives and subordinates. The existence of such policies has led nearly two in five workers involved in office romance to keep that relationship a secret. On the other hand, some companies may require employees to submit an official disclosure report to HR acknowledging their relationship. If you're currently in a relationship with a coworker – or maybe on the cusp of a new one – be aware both of your own company's policies around office relationships, and of your own behavior. Keep it professional in the office, don't let your relationship impact your work, and clarify what your HR policies expect from you. Happy Valentine's Day, everyone! *Want to hear more about workplace romances and the HR policies you can (and can't) have around them? Check out the latest episode of our Viventium Voices podcast, What's Love Got to Do with It: Relationships in the Office.*

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