

Looking for Love in All the Workplaces

By Mitch Owens,
People First Solutions

As any insomniac who watches late-night infomercials can tell you, new dating and introduction services are popping into existence on an almost daily basis. We're not only looking for love--we're still trying to figure out *where* to look for it. And studies indicate that we're increasingly turning to the one location where we regularly interact with people we already know, the workplace. The rise of office romance, however, raises serious issues for employers.

The first of these is a concern over lost productivity. Romantic intra-office e-mails and other forms of flirting may seem harmless enough, but they'll detract from the bottom line if they're indulged in on company time. More significantly, the nepotism that can sometimes result from office romance usually impacts efficiency in some way, by causing dissension in the ranks, and/or by having tasks and responsibilities inequitably and inappropriately assigned.

One possible solution is to establish a company dating policy, and for some organizations this has meant a "no-dating" policy. Such a measure carries with it certain risks, however. While some legal precedents support the right of employers to impose rules against staff dating, employees might resent these rules as an intrusion into their private, personal lives, and when was the last time you heard about employee resentment having a positive result?

Furthermore, with such a policy in place, employees who enter into a promising relationship with each other may choose to depart the company in order to pursue that relationship, leaving the employer with the burden and expense of recruiting and training their replacements.

For those who decide to remain with the company and to keep their relationship a secret, their productivity will inevitably be affected by the ongoing stress of the deception. If, however, you have in place fair and consistently implemented policies regarding your employees' workplace conduct in general, a specific dating rule may not be necessary.

A far more serious concern is the issue of sexual harassment. Persistent unwanted advances and problematic relationships between superiors and subordinates can lead a company into a world of financial hurt, particularly if such cases become public knowledge: the ensuing gossip within the workplace can trigger a temporary productivity drop of as much as twenty percent, and profits can be lowered by as much as thirty percent by adverse publicity. And that's in addition to the possible legal costs, which can be considerable.

Persistent unwanted advances and problematic relationships between superiors and subordinates can lead a company into a world of financial hurt, particularly if such cases become public knowledge.

Clear, fair policies and procedures are needed to deal with these issues *before* they blow up into serious problems. In the case of one employee showing unwelcome attention to another, there should be a system of progressive discipline in place to protect the interests of both parties, one which allows the first employee the opportunity to correct their behaviour while ensuring that the other feels safe in the workplace.

There should also be a policy to deal with superior/subordinate romantic relationships because of the power imbalance inherent in such relationships. For example, when it is practical, one of the parties should be reassigned to another department at the same level of pay and responsibility; another option is to have the subordinate's performance evaluated by someone other than the person with whom they are in a relationship.

On both issues, employee dating and sexual harassment, there are two best ways for a business to protect itself. The first is to have policies that are clearly formulated, effectively communicated and uniformly applied, so that everyone knows where they stand, and so that no one can justifiably accuse the company of inconsistency or find refuge in plausible denial.

The second, of course, is to hire the right people. If you properly screen and assess prospective employees, you'll have a professional workforce with enough common sense and decorum to balance romance with the demands of business.

Mitch Owens is the Client Communications Coordinator for People First Solutions.