



RISKY BUSINESS

Can You Make An Office Romance Work?

By Felicia S. Levine

Despite what can often be risky business, an increasing number of Americans are dipping their toes in the office dating pool. A 2008 CareerBuilder.com survey of more than 8,000 participants found that 40 percent of employees dated a co-worker, and 31 percent married that person. Further, 35 percent admitted to dating someone of higher rank in the company (14 percent dated their boss) and 10 percent currently worked with someone they'd like to date.

It's understandable. "It's hard to meet people, and you spend more time with these people than anyone else," explains Andrea Nierenberg, president of the Nierenberg Group, a New York City-based training and development company.

Indeed, as working adults, we're no longer exposed to school settings ripe with potential paramours and we're *so over* the bar scene. Consequently, offices have become the new nightclubs/classrooms where, between e-mails and PowerPoint presentations, we socialize. Throw in some things in common and, well,

(perhaps too far?) to avoid any semblance of favoritism. (Did I mention she was his boss?)

After deciding it was best not to have their professional eggs in one basket, she left. He stayed. They're divorced now.

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— Andrea Nierenberg, president, the Nierenberg Group

I know a journalist who dated a co-worker. She and her partner kept it on the down-low, reveling in the thrill of their scandalous secret. They shared knowing glances, lingering lunches and even a stolen kiss or two. When he proposed, they came out of the cubicle — how else could they explain the big ol' rock on her finger?

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your office manager could probably moonlight as a matchmaker.

An added bonus to dating a co-worker: Your company has already run the criminal background checks.

Hollywood makes it look so easy. TV viewers cheered when Jim and Pam finally got together on *The Office*, and you'd be hard-pressed to find

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someone *not* sleeping with a colleague on *Grey's Anatomy*. And what woman didn't stifle a tear when Tom Cruise told Renee Zellweger, "You complete me," in *Jerry Maguire*? In reality, however, office affairs more often turn out closer to the Demi Moore-Michael Douglas debacle in *Disclosure*.

While dating under the radar can be thrilling, there's a risk of getting caught – or worse, *fired*, depending on your company's policy. Even in the best-case scenario, you're virtually guaranteed to become fodder for the gossip mill.

Further, if you think you're dating on the sly – you're probably not. "You think that nobody knows – but everyone knows," says Nierenberg, who has seen it all. She recalls a married lawyer and his female staffer, who decided to become "friends with benefits."

"When the relationship didn't lead to more, the woman got upset and started causing trouble, sending inappropriate e-mails and photos. She got fired. Because he was a partner in the firm, all he got was a slap on the wrist."

She remembers a female senior executive who had an affair with a junior staff member. Things were wonderful, until he started using work information she'd shared during pillow talk as a means to get ahead. "They both left the company, and she ended up with a black mark on her career," says Nierenberg.

Of course, dangerous or not, workers continue to date up a storm. According to a Vault.com survey, 58 percent of employees polled reported having been involved in an office romance, up from 46 percent two years ago. Seventeen percent admitted to canoodling in the lunchroom, on the stairwell – even in the boss's office.

If you're going to engage in an office affair, experts say, use your head. Check your employee handbook. Is there a rule specifying no office relationships? Talk to your partner regarding how you want to handle the situation. Depending on the rules in place, you may wish to notify your boss or human resour-

ces department (some companies have employees sign relationship contracts to avoid potential sexual harassment suits down the line).

Next, decide if you're going to "officially" take your relationship public. Sneaking around can be stressful, but being the object of curiosity can be equally unnerving. It gets dicier if one of you is of higher rank in the company, leaving you vulnerable to accusations of favoritism.

And for goodness sake, be discreet. No one wants to see you making out or hear your intimate exchanges. And love notes, be they paper or digital, are a huge no-no. Don't let your work slide – just because you're dating a big shot doesn't mean you can shirk your duties. And don't expect or accept special favors. "That's what breeds office gossip," Nierenberg warns.

Most importantly, keep your personal life personal: Don't argue in public and be cautious at office holiday par-

ties. "After a few drinks, you may let your guard down," says Nierenberg. "Before you know it, you're kissing or having a public spat."

While not the most romantic way to enter a relationship, it's important to proceed with caution. Be prepared for a potential breakup and the painful awkwardness that could ensue. "You may still have a job technically, but people look at you differently," says Nierenberg. Often, this strain leads to one, or both, partners resigning.

A final confession: I am the above-mentioned journalist. My ex-husband and I remain close friends, and even joke there should be an award for the world's most cordial divorce. As an office romance survivor, people sometimes ask me: After dealing with the sneaking around, staff scrutiny, awkward meetings and eventual resignation ... would I do it all over again?

Definitely. ○