

HR Examiner

*Examining practical HR issues business owners
and managers encounter every day*

Romance in the Workplace

Arlene Vernon

On March 1st, I was quoted in *The Network Journal: Black Professionals and Small Business News* in an article written by Ann Brown. I thought I would share it with you. The article is reprinted below.

The Good, The Bad, The Ugly

Office romances used to be taboo. But according to a recent Workplace Options survey of Millennial employees, a shocking 84 percent of workers ages 18-29 said they would have a romantic relationship with a co-worker. Compare this to only 36 percent of Generation X workers (ages 30-46) and 29 percent of Boomers (age 47-66). An unbelievably 40 percent of Millennials say they saw nothing wrong with dating their supervisors (compared to just 10 percent of older generations).

Going deeper, 71 percent of Millennial employees said they believe there are positive aspects to a workplace romance, including boosting performance and morale.

But most experts advise steering clear of office romance. "Based on my experience working with clients who end up in office romance disasters, my advice is always to look elsewhere for relationships than

where you work,” says Sharon Gilchrest O’Neill, a licensed marriage and family therapist and the author of “A Short Guide to a Happy Marriage.” “There are just too many boundary issues that can ruin your career, or minimally have you dealing with disastrous politics and break-up fall-out while you’re trying to do your job.”

Why Office Romances Happen

“Probably the greatest reason is that people spend so much time with each other day after day at work, they begin to have feelings for each other that go beyond work-friends,” explains Arlene Vernon, president of HRx, Inc. where she provides practical management consulting and training services to create positive workplace cultures.

Dr. Carole Lieberman, psychiatrist and author of “Bad Girls: Why Men Love Them & How Good Girls Can Learn Their Secrets,” agrees. “Men and women often spend more time in the office than they do at home. And many times there is more collaboration and sharing of challenges and success at work which can bring a man and woman closer together. So it's a 'fertile field' for attraction and romance to blossom,” she adds.

Working on projects together, having shared goals and challenges can bring men and women closer. “The energy of working on projects together often times in and of itself is exciting, and people get turned on by sharing that creative energy and then relate more intimately to each other,” offers marriage and family therapist Dr. Jane Greer, SHRINK WRAP media commentator.

In this sort of situation, O’Neill says it is important to analyze your feelings. “It is not unusual to find yourself having positive feelings about a co-worker or boss, particularly if it is someone you admire, who is intelligent and has a great mind,” she points out. “You may feel yourself becoming attracted to this person, but it is important to realize that it doesn't usually mean that you are falling for them; it is mostly about falling for the power or brains.”

Short-Lived? Or Longevity?

You may have heard a story or two about someone who finds their future mate at the workplace. But most relationship experts say this is rare. “There are many people who have acquired the skills to maintain normal personal relationships/romances with coworkers. If these become long-term relationships, likely the people will marry or cohabitate making them a more permanent couple,” says Vernon. But if one person has a higher position than the other, things could get sticky—and negatively impact other workers. “If one person is a supervisor who showing favoritism or who meets behind closed doors with the partner, there’s an even greater risk for an observer or coworker to initiate harassment claims related to ‘hostile environment,’” she adds. Sexual harassment suits also often pop up when one of the romantically involved feels jilted.

The odds are against an office romance surviving. “There are many things working against them, especially if one or both are married. Frequently, a spouse begins to suspect that something is going on at the office besides work. This makes the coworker nervous and the office romance goes south,” notes Dr. Lieberman.

The Negatives to Romance In The Office

The threat of harassment and harassment lawsuits are major concerns. But, as Vernon explains, there are other issues to keep in mind as well. “Distrust from one’s coworkers is another negative if people question your loyalty to peers, breach of confidentiality, nepotism, etc., because you’re in a workplace relationship,” she says. “The break up is probably the worst negative when the two people don’t handle it well. If one person has been dumped, s/he could display problematic behavior, talk badly about the other, try to hurt their image, avoid the other person and/or participate in a wide range of visible behaviors that could affect others.”

How To Stay Professional When A Romance Ends

This could be different for some, depending on how the romance ended—and could wind up either

costing you your job or making you feel so uncomfortable that you quit. “Keep the personal side of the relationship personal and private. Don’t discuss what’s happened with anyone in the workplace. Even those you trust are tempted to share the details with others in the workplace and that’s when reputations get hurt,” advises Vernon.

Avoid dealing with the person in non-business settings. “Limit your contact – only have necessary interactions driven by your work responsibilities,” offers Dr. Greer.

If you cannot handle the situation, then change your environment. “It is often very difficult to remain professional when a workplace romance has gone sour, especially for the co-worker who still wants to win their lover back,” concludes Dr. Lieberman. “If you cannot remain professional, it may be better to ask for a transfer of some sort - whether it be to another desk farther away from the former romantic partner, or to another office altogether. If a transfer isn't possible, you may need to look for another job if the pain is too much to handle and still do your best work.”

About Arlene Vernon

Arlene has provided HR consulting and management training services to over 300 organizations since starting HRx, Inc. in 1992.

If you’re seeking a hands-on, practical HRxpert to assist your organization with employee relations, policy development, strategic HR activities or fun/doable management training, call on Arlene – Your HRxpert.

If you’re planning a conference, seminar or special event, Arlene specializes in keynotes, seminars and workshops to meet your talent management needs. And if you’re seeking a more lively entertaining activity, Arlene’s custom songs and musical-inspirational keynote may be perfect for your organization!

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