

Use 4 Strategies to Regulate Workplace Romances



According to a 2007 study by CareerBuilder.ca, 31% of Canadian workers say they've dated a co-worker and 24% say there's somebody in their workplace whom they'd like to date. But workplace romances can cause disruptions and legal troubles not only for the parties to the romance but also for their co-workers, supervisors and employers.

Just look what happened when this Ontario office love affair went sour.

Two city employees were romantically involved until the woman ended the relationship. The male employee refused to take no for an answer. At first, he tried wooing her back. But it didn't work. When his ex-girlfriend moved in with another male co-worker, he got nasty. He contacted her co-workers, superiors and family members; showed up at her house; tried to get her fired; and even tried to run over her new boyfriend with his car.

After the female employee complained, the city fired ex-boyfriend without notice. He sued for wrongful dismissal. But an Ontario court ruled that he'd engaged in serious misconduct that warranted summary dismissal [*Menagh v. City of Hamilton*, [2007] ONCA 244 (CanLII), April 5, 2007].

Office romances can cause problems in the workplace for several reasons:

- Attraction isn't always mutual. When one co-worker spurns the advances of another, it makes both sides uncomfortable.
- Office romances may also distort the professional relationships and distribution of authority necessary in the workplace if the employees involved have a supervisor-subordinate working relationship.
- Even when a romance is going well, the partners may get distracted and work less productively or engage in public displays of affection that make co-workers uncomfortable.
- And as the *Menagh* case shows, romances are probably at their most

disruptive when a couple breaks up. The tension between the former lovers may spill over into the workplace and negatively affect their work and that of their colleagues. And in some cases, the bad blood can lead to charges of sexual harassment being filed against the worker and the company.

What, if anything, should companies do about romantic relationships in the workplace'

It may be tempting to simply ban all romantic relationships between employees. But a total ban on office romances is almost impossible to enforce and will simply drive workers to secrecy. Also, imposing such a ban may hurt morale if workers feel like you're interfering in a very personal part of their lives. After all, many people meet their mates at work. In the study mentioned above, 15% of worker who dated a co-worker went on to marry the person.

So instead of banning workplace romances, regulate them with these four strategies:

Ban relationships between supervisors and subordinates. One form of romantic relationship that you should ban is that between supervisors and subordinates. Such relationships are inappropriate because supervisors typically have the power to make recommendations to the company affecting a subordinate's position, pay or other terms of employment. In other words, banning a supervisor-subordinate romance is necessary to avoid conflicts of interest that can harm the company, the subordinate and his or her co-workers.

Require professional behaviour at work. Although you can't ban dating workers from seeing each other after work, you should make it clear that they must behave professionally while they're in the workplace, even outside work hours. For example, warn employees that they may not engage in intimate personal relations in the office at any time. And there should be no kissing in the copy room or sending flirtatious e-mail over company computers.

Require employees to come clean about their romance. Generally speaking, employers have no right to know who their employees are dating. However, the employment relationship is founded on trust. As an employer, you may be entitled to ask about romances to the extent that they interfere in any way with an employee's performance or the company's business. For example, say a supervisor asks an employee who's attending a conference which co-workers should also attend. You want that employee to suggest the most appropriate co-workers'not the one she happens to be dating so they get a company-paid trip together. So require employees to tell their supervisors if they're dating a co-worker.

Consider separating dating employees. If two workers in the same department are dating, consider requiring one of them to transfer to another department or leave the company. Although this policy may feel harsh, it's an effective way to eliminate most problems associated with workplace romances.