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published February 13, 2008
I Gave (My Heart) at the Office

The pros and cons of dating a coworker.

by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor



Freelance writer Dawn Weinberger lives in Portland, Ore., with her husband, Carl, and her cat, Lucy Lui. She covers health, fashion, pets and green living for several local and national publications.

If you are smitten by that John Krasinski look-alike who just became the newest member of your company's accounting team, join the club. According to a CareerBuilder.com survey, 10 percent of office workers admit that they "currently have their eye on someone at work who they would like to date in the near future," and a whopping 43 percent say they have dated a coworker. A significant number of that group--34 percent--wind up getting married to someone they met at work.

"We live in a world where work has become our identity," says Helaine Olen, co-author with Stephanie Losee of "Office Mate: The Employee Handbook for Finding and Managing Romance on the Job." "Being in a workplace together means you have things in common."

Plus, most people spend a huge percentage of time at work, making it the easiest place to meet potential dates, explains Marie G. McIntyre, Ph.D., an expert on business relationships and the author of "Secrets to Winning at Office Politics."

"You won't have to spend your off-hours searching for the love of your life if they're already available at the office," McIntyre says.

Risky Business

But that doesn't mean you should throw all caution to the wind. On-the-job romance is often tricky to navigate, and if the relationship fails, you've got the makings of a very awkward situation.

Just ask Carrie Ross (not her real name), a 24-year-old marketing professional from Maryland. Though she always cringed at the idea of getting involved with coworkers, Ross met a "really nice guy" at the office. After some flirting and a series of dates, they became a couple. A few months into their relationship, however, Ross started noticing suspicious behavior. She ultimately discovered that her boyfriend was cheating on her--with another coworker.

"It was embarrassing and horrible," says Ross. "A part of me wanted to look for another job."

Though she acknowledges that it isn't easy to do, McIntyre says the best way to deal with such a fallout is to "separate the personal from the professional and continue communicating in a mature, adult manner at work--even if you hate the person's guts."

And that's not the only risk involved. McIntyre says it's not unusual for a couple's office relationship to contaminate their personal relationship, and vice versa.

"You might have a professional difference of opinion that carries over into a personal fight at home," she explains. "Or you have a fight at home and then refuse to speak to each other at the office, which is not fair to your other colleagues."

Her advice? Discuss the scenario in advance and come up with a plan--one that will ideally keep it from happening.

That's how Lora Morgaine of Seattle and her husband handled things. They met at work more than a decade ago, and successfully managed working in the same office for years during their courtship and marriage. Personal issues were never discussed on company time, and if something needed immediate attention, they waited until lunchtime to hash it out. Plus, the pair maintained a professional composure at all times.

"No kissing in the janitor's closet," she says.

Coming Clean

Though Morgaine and her husband didn't formally announce their relationship, it didn't take long for coworkers to figure it out. When they did, everyone was supportive--even the boss.

"If you're going to be in an ongoing relationship, it is OK to let people find out," McIntyre says.

In fact, she urges people to avoid the fantasy that it is even possible to keep the romance under wraps.

"The most common delusion of people who are in love--or lust--is that no one can tell, when in reality they're giving off signals all over the place," she explains.

However, this isn't a license to inform the entire company via e-mail. McIntyre says the only person entitled to an official heads-up is the manager--especially if both parties report to the same person.

"But after informing the boss, don't mention it again," she says.

And speaking of the person-in-command, McIntyre says that dating the boss (or the boss's boss) should be avoided at all costs.

"Anytime a manager is dating a subordinate, there will be both problems and policy issues," she explains.

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