

Library Management of Interpersonal Relationships Between Employees

by

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Introduction

The issue of interpersonal relationships in the workplace has traditionally been regarded as of concern in the business world, with relatively little attention given to the occurrence in library management literature. Thus, a random survey of twenty-one public library supervisors in Indiana was conducted to explore whether dating is an issue in the library setting and to gain a sense of how it is currently being addressed. Management in general has a history of ignoring this sensitive issue, often out of fear of interfering with an employee's right to privacy.¹ However, workplace romance is a regular occurrence in any professional setting, and it is the authors' position that it would be wise for managers to have guidelines in place on how to handle this issue, especially in the case of disruptive occurrences that effect the overall operations of the library.

A recent Gallup poll found that "more than half of employed Americans (57 percent) find workplace dating acceptable."² However, when people are initially presented with the concept of such relationships in the workplace, first reactions are often times unfavorable.³ There are a number of social trends that promote the occurrence of dating between co-workers. For instance, women now fill 45 percent of existing jobs, often times in positions that coexist with or outrank those held by men.⁴ This increases the opportunity for intimate interactions between colleagues, whereas traditionally women who worked outside the home were in positions subordinate to men. In addition, because people work on the average of 158 hours more per year than they did twenty years ago, leisure time has greatly decreased.⁵ This creates fewer places for individuals to meet suitable partners. Most influential perhaps is the fact that people working together tend to share similar backgrounds, as socioeconomic class, educational, and ethnic backgrounds influence career selection.⁶ In light of

these factors, workplace romance may seem like the perfect solution. However, still at issue are the negative effects workplace romance can create such as gossip and the potential for low productivity. Clearly, workplace dating is a delicate issue which does not have any definitive solutions.

This paper addresses the lack of library management information by looking at the following aspects of interpersonal relationships within the workplace. The next section describes the possible positive aspects of workplace romance, including the boost in employee's morale and higher productivity. The following section describes possible negative aspects of workplace romance, including difficulties with co-workers and unfortunate legal repercussions. A later section presents some guidelines for managers who want to address the issue openly and frankly for the sake of a happier and more efficient work environment; and finally, there is a brief conclusion of the overall issues involving workplace dating.

Positive Aspects of Workplace Dating

There are many compelling arguments for allowing workplace dating. Although controversial, this type of behavior occurs quite often. A recent survey of 100 executive women indicated that seventy-six of them were aware of or had had a workplace romance.⁷ "Work is sexy. Affairs occur because people work long and hard, and when you're working intensively on something together, ideas flow and energy often generates heat. Many people enjoy the intrigue and the cover-up."⁸ Of the twenty-one Indiana public library supervisors surveyed, ten had previously witnessed employee dating, resulting in dozens of weddings from the relationships. This scenario can easily happen when individuals with similar likes and interests spend the majority of their time working in close proximity.

A growing number of work environments are even looking upon employee romance favorably, believing that sexual attraction may boost productivity because work is more enjoyable and workers feel happier, less stressed, and satisfied with their personal lives.⁹ David Eyder and Andrea Baridon, authors of "Managing Sexual Attraction in the Workplace" agree that sexual chemistry between colleagues is a positive situation and one that should be utilized.¹⁰ "When co-workers find themselves attracted to each other, they can turn their work into a passion, a creative endeavor that generates energy unknown in most business relationships."¹¹ Eyder and Baridon also support a "more-than-friends, less-than-lovers" model, in which the attraction is channeled toward a productive work outlet and not a sexual one. "The more-than-friends, less-than-lovers model offers a way to avoid affairs or painful misunderstandings

while maximizing the productive aspects of an especially well matched male-female team."¹² In this scenario, the two individuals feed off each other, creating a positive force that could potentially strengthen the production and creativity of the involved individuals. Recent studies have concluded that when it comes to problem solving, mixed-sex teams are faster and more imaginative than single-sex teams since sexual tension in mixed teams makes people try harder to understand, help, and impress one another.¹³

Couples who work together also have the ability to be each other's counselor on work-related issues and are able to understand the demands and pressures involved at the workplace. Couples with the same employer may also have a little more flexibility in their schedules and have an easier time planning for their fast paced daily lives.¹⁴ Communication can also become stronger, as convenient access to one another is always present.¹⁵ A richer benefits package may also be created if the happy couple matriculates into a long lasting relationship.

Negative Aspects of Workplace Dating

There are also many compelling articles written that are against employees dating one another. When dating begins, those involved may fail to realize the possible professional and personal drawbacks of their relationship, not to mention their loss of privacy. While many work environments may tolerate dating between co-workers, supervisor/employee affairs are still viewed as a negative circumstance on the part of the individuals involved. According to those who oppose workplace dating, co-workers become jealous and angry, causing productivity to suffer.¹⁶ Accusations may arise over favoritism, especially for female subordinates who begin a romance with a male boss. "In these situations people still tend to blame the woman because she is likely to have less responsibility and power, she is also likelier to be transferred or let go."¹⁷ This double standard can and often does tarnish the reputations and careers of prominent women. However, this trend may decrease, for in "the morally and ethically conscious 1990s, the boss who is clearly in a conflict-of-interest position may also end up paying a penalty -- even if the boss is a man."¹⁸

In regards to communication, the employee grapevine also becomes plagued with gossip and rumors start to spread throughout the workplace. Employees are well aware of their co-workers' social behavior and often do not hesitate to speculate and create gossip. "Lovers never understand the grapevine is vital to internal communication. If it's tied up with love stories, important information isn't getting through."¹⁹ A situation occurred in one of the sample public libraries where two married employees were "infatuated" with one

another, spending excess time in each other's departments, taking long lunch breaks, and excessively talking to one another. Their respectability was tarnished among other employees, and the grapevine was plagued with gossip. After receiving a warning from the supervisor, the behavior did decrease and eventually one of the involved employees moved to another library.

If the relationship doesn't last, working with an ex-lover can be a difficult situation, especially if feelings of interest still exist on the part of one of the individuals. This can make working conditions very uncomfortable, especially if the individual becomes involved with another employee. This scenario occurred in one of the sample libraries, causing the distracted employee to leave the library for another position.

In some situations, however, an individual can be discriminated against for not having an affair. Viewed as "economic rape," this scenario isolates those unwilling to engage in an interpersonal relationship, while rewarding willing participants with perks such as money, key assignments, and travel opportunities.²⁰ Thus, those individuals unwilling to participate are unable to compete and must either submit to the pressure of becoming involved with a supervisor, transfer, or accept low seniority in their present work environment.

Sexual harassment is another issue, since disgruntled ex-lovers can make returning to a strictly professional relationship virtually impossible. In a 1991 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, 47 percent of those questioned stated sexual harassment as a problem that could result from workplace romance.²¹ The situation may generate lawsuits, high employee turnover, and increased money spent on legal actions. Worse yet, one out of twenty sexual harassment cases are dismissed because the individual was previously involved with the co-worker in the suit.²² This situation is not only unfair, it also creates the illusion that sexual harassment is justifiable between ex-lovers. Another drawback of employee dating, according to critics, involves yet another possible legal repercussion. A workplace can be sued by a worker who claims a romantic relationship interfered with his or her work environment and made work conditions "hostile." If co-workers can prove that favoritism was more than just an isolated incident, a case could easily be made.²³ Couples must struggle to be seen as individual players. There is a danger that "people will think you are getting preferential treatment or will make assumptions about your career path, abilities, or preferences based on what your spouse or (lover) is doing."²⁴ Thus favoritism may cause a library to unwantingly become involved with legal matters and lower its image in the eyes of the public.

Managerial Guidelines for Workplace Romance

Most of the surveyed public library managers agreed that they do not want to interfere in the personal lives of their employees. However, management not only has the right to protect the overall operations of their respective libraries but the responsibility to do so as well. A 1991 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management found that of 1,500 personnel managers nationwide, 92 percent had no policy involving employee dating. They found that 70 percent accepted dating among co-workers, 28 percent officially allowed it but discouraged its occurrence, and only 2 percent prohibited it outright.²⁵

Not one of the twenty-one Indiana public library supervisors surveyed had a policy regarding employee dating. Two libraries stated they would consider implementing a policy only if the situation ever became a serious problem. However, each supervisor stated they would address an interpersonal relationship between employees if the behavior was affecting work performance. "I would be very reluctant to write a policy (forbidding employee dating)..." one supervisor stated. "The key factor is how personal relationships influence work performance and service to patrons. If the influence is negative, then the library can take action against those behaviors that are unacceptable. However, the library administration must be careful to focus comments and concerns directly on work behavior." If employee dating is interfering with the work environment, it needs to be addressed on the same basis as any other behavioral problem.

This paper is not a recommendation for the formation of formal policies forbidding employee dating. Physical attraction cannot be eliminated because a policy pronounces it is not allowed. However, policy guidelines surrounding this issue can address any behavior that interferes with library operations and list ways to handle the situations accordingly. One suggestion is to create a policy of non-interference, whereby employees are disciplined or even terminated if their personal lives interfere with their work performance.²⁶ To properly enforce this, managers need to be trained in how to handle romances and encouraged to be direct and open about problems from the very beginning. This would include discussing only noticeable behavior and avoiding any moral judgments.²⁷ Management also needs to be aware that each case of workplace romance is unique and should be treated accordingly.

The following guidelines are suggestions taken from management literature in hopes of preparing supervisors to handle workplace romance effectively and fairly, with the least amount of frustration in the work environment:

- 1) Policy needs to be addressed and management must be open and frank

about the problems which could arise from employees dating one another. This can be discussed at regularly scheduled meetings as well as through employee newsletters to make workers aware of the situation.

- 2) Training for new employees should include a discussion of workplace romance and the library's policy towards the situation in the orientation program. A similar discussion is necessary in management training, which should also cover the topic of favoritism.
- 3) Coaching can be implemented in order to support the manager of a couple who are involved in a romance by meeting with the supervisor to review the policy. Suggestions can be made on how to handle the relationship within the library setting.²⁸
- 4) Managers need to openly discuss the situation with a romancing couple if their involvement is affecting their work performance. Only noticeable behaviors should be discussed and both the manager and the couple must be given ample opportunity to talk. Documentation should be made when any employee behavior that needs to be discussed occurs, as well as any agreements or disagreements that come about during the meeting. These actions require effective communication skills, including both verbal and nonverbal actions.

Harvey Robbins, author of *How to Speak and Listen Effectively* (American Management Association, 1992), recommends the following techniques for managers to successfully discuss negative behavior with employees:²⁹

- Describe the specific behavior observed
- Describe the impact of the behavior on others in the working environment
- Share your personal feelings about the situation. This will expose the impact their behavior had on you personally
- Describe the consequences of the behavior
- Reach an agreement on how to change the behavior

Conclusion

Libraries are not exempt from employee dating, and the situation certainly requires some thought. It is already a serious issue not likely to decrease in importance in the coming years, especially as the workplace changes in the twenty-first century. Co-workers need to understand the issues surrounding workplace dating, and this can be done only if management chooses to openly

address the issue and make employees aware of the positive and negative aspects of this behavior. Employees would then be more likely to make informed decisions and decide if they really want to engage in a relationship and handle the possibility of a failed romance. Dating a co-worker can be rewarding on a personal and professional level, but it can also lead to frustration and problems that are better kept out of the workplace. Serious consideration is necessary before one decides to bring love into the workplace. Accordingly, managers must make sure to address the issues, especially to avoid having the behavior negatively effect library operations.

End Notes

1. Colby, p. 23
2. Rapp, p. 57
3. Devine and Markiewicz, p. 334
4. Alderman, p. 37
5. Losey, p. 25
6. Anderson and Hunsaker, p. 57
7. Rapp, p. 58
8. *ibid*, p. 58
9. Fisher, p. 253
10. Eyler and Baridon, p.20
11. *ibid*, p.20
12. *ibid*, p.23
13. Fisher, p. 253
14. Thornburg, p. 46
15. *ibid*, p. 46
16. Rapp, p. 59
17. *ibid*, p.59
18. *ibid*, p.58
19. Kennedy, p. 26
20. Rapp, p. 59
21. Jenner, p. 5
22. Rapp, p. 60
23. Alderman, p. 37
24. Thornburg, p. 45

25. Jenner, p. 5
26. Anderson and Hunsaker, p. 63
27. Colby, p. 23
28. *ibid*, p. 23
29. Robbins, p. 68

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