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## The danger of love

Affairs of the heart can happen on the job, but getting involved in a romance with a co-worker can be trouble.

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People spend hours and hours at work each week, so it's not shocking that romance can blossom amid a garden of cubicles.

With working lunches, dinners and constant connections via a hip-mounted Blackberry, there's less of a separation between an employee's personal and professional lives. "One of the outcomes potentially is that more relationships with co-workers are starting just by the sheer nature that your co-workers seem to know you better than anyone these days," said Rosemary Haefner, vice president of human resources at CareerBuilder.com, the job search Web site.

Indeed, in CareerBuilder.com's annual office romance survey released today, four in 10 workers say they have dated a co-worker sometime during their career, with 20 percent saying they did it more than twice. CareerBuilder.com is partly owned by Gannett Co. Inc., the parent company of the Asbury Park Press.

But office love can be perilous. Romance and the tight bond it brings between two co-workers can cause bad feelings and dissension among the rest of the people in the office. If love blooms between a boss and a subordinate, someone could lose his or her job.

"My No. 1 advice to people would be don't do it," said Mary Crane, a Denver-based expert on business life issues. "There are just huge risks any time you have an office relationship."

Relationships at work can go bad, Crane said, pointing to the recent high-profile case of Lisa Nowak, an astronaut who was accused of stalking a woman she believed was a rival for the affections of a fellow astronaut.

"All of a sudden we have a woman who is driving across the country in an adult diaper to confront the new lover," Crane said, touching on details of the case that made headlines a year ago.

Workplace romance is a distraction, said John Buzza, director of the Center for Entrepreneurship at Monmouth University.

"Where is your commitment during the day? Is it to the company, or is to other things that are going on that have nothing to do with the company?"

Colleagues may not think that their fellow employee is focused on the job at hand, Buzza said. "It has a trickle down effect and everyone is affected," he said.

But there are signs that some companies may turn a blind eye to workplace romance between co-workers. In the CareerBuilder.com survey, 66 percent of those who had a workplace relationship said they did not have to keep it a secret.

"The perception is it's becoming less taboo. You can actually be a bit more open and talk about it more freely in the work environment," Haefner said. "The perceptions are definitely evolving over time."

It's not that employers take it lightly. They are just focused on other things, such as the company's business and measuring people against results, she said.

"I think also that individuals have gotten a bit more aware that when you are in the office, you need to be professional," Haefner said.

But, Buzza said, even if their obligations at work are met, employers have to wonder if the workers would be more productive if they weren't busy making eyes at each other.

"How much better could the results be if this other little distraction wasn't there?" Buzza said.

Laura Brinkerhoff, owner of Brinkerhoff Environmental Services in Wall, said her company does not have a policy that discourages romantic relationships between employees.

"I think if you find love, what and where does it matter where you find it? Go for it," Brinkerhoff said. "If it interferes with your job and your ability to get your work done, that's when it becomes a problem."

Romance between a staff member and a boss especially is a problem, even if the relationship works.

"In my experience, either one of them is transferred or one of them leaves," said Beverly Baskin, a career counselor and executive director of Baskin Business and Career Services in Marlboro. "The other people around them get jealous, start to become frustrated or just feel that they are not equal."

People may wonder whether a worker is getting a raise, promotion or key assignment because of the relationship, Crane said. "It becomes a real fairness issue."

If a relationship sours, a claim of sexual harassment, a hostile work environment or lawsuit may be the result. Someone could claim that a supervisor was using his or her influence to force the relationship, said Toms River attorney Jonathan Z. Petro, who specializes in employment law at Carluccio, Leone, Dimon, Doyle & Sacks.

"They may look at the relationship as not being fully consensual," said Petro. "We are talking about the end of the happy time of the relationship."

If Cupid's arrow strikes, the couple should decide on a set of ground rules that can help make their personal and professional sides work, Crane said. It can be difficult to find that line.

For example, Crane said, during the work day, how often will they e-mail each other or have lunch together? Public displays of affection are a no-no.

It also helps to come up with a plan if romance fails.

"Let's be mature. Let's be adults about this," Crane said. "We really, really hope that this is going to turn out successful. If it doesn't, what is the agreement on how we are going to interact with each other?"

Rather than get involved in a romance at work, Baskin said a person should admire a co-worker's qualities and use that as a guide to find a person after work hours.

"It really isn't wise when you look at the big picture," she said.

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