

Dangerous liaisons

Affairs between colleagues might be common, and often lead to lifelong partnerships, but they can also be fraught with danger.

Sally Percy reports

Forget internet chat rooms and expensive dating agencies. We all know that the love of our lives is more likely to be sitting at the next desk rather than the handsome stranger who meets our eyes across a crowded room. And with surveys revealing that as many as one in four of us meet our partner at work, it's not surprising that many accountants barely blink an eyelid at the romantic goings-on of their colleagues.

Nevertheless, as we saw last month from the fallout over deputy prime minister John Prescott's affair with his diary secretary Tracey Temple, workplace relationships can be risky business. Not only are individual reputations at stake, but the organisation as a whole can suffer a heavy blow when a personal relationship goes sour.

Phil Shohet of KATO Consulting, an adviser to small-to-mid-tier accountancy firms, doesn't approve of office romances in any form, even when they involve two single people.

'They are bad for business,' he says bluntly. 'I think one has to set an example in the workplace.'

His view is shared by Ronnie Fox, partner and employment law specialist with Fox Solicitors. 'I think office relationships are fraught with danger,' he says. 'I think people underestimate how badly things can go. People can get caught between their feelings for each other and their responsibilities as employees. The danger isn't as great if you've got two people at equal level, but if one is senior to the other, it can go wrong very easily.'

Women tend to come off worse when an office relationship takes a wrong turn, particularly if they are junior in status. 'I've seen it again and again,'

says Fox. 'The woman is forced to leave and the senior manager stays where he is and that can lead to a sexual discrimination claim.'

There is no limit on the amount an employee tribunal can award in the event of a successful sexual discrimination claim and in some cases compensation has already topped the £1m mark. But although lawsuits may be high profile and costly, they are not the only harmful consequences of office affairs.

Resentment and reputation

A liaison between two colleagues, one or both of whom are in other relationships outside the workplace, is likely to be widely disapproved of by staff. Not only will it be seen as a breach of moral standards, but it can cause resentment if co-workers are put in an awkward situation at social functions where they mingle with their colleagues' partners.

Then there is the matter of reputation. In professional firms, a lot of respect is traditionally shown towards the senior personnel, particularly partners. But this can disappear if a person is seen as behaving inappropriately or even worse, abusing their position by showing favouritism towards the person they are having an affair with.

Shohet says: 'If you must have an extra-marital affair, surely you can find someone outside the environment without bringing it into the office? It can't do anyone any good morale-wise.'

He cites an example of a married male partner in a West Midlands accountancy firm who had been having an affair with a single female partner unbeknown to the rest of the staff. Their relationship only came to light after the female partner brought her four-year-old child into the

office. The child ran straight up to the male partner while he was standing in the audit room and shouted 'Daddy!'

According to Shohet, the reputations of the partners involved were irreparably damaged by the incident, which staff considered 'a huge joke'.

Losing talent

But even relationships considered 'above board' can have a damaging effect on staff morale and consequently on productivity, with the worst outcome being talented people deciding to leave the firm.

'If an office relationship ends acrimoniously, it can be very divisive in the workplace,' says Pamela Wood, support and development manager with the Chartered Accountants Benevolent Association, which runs a confidential 24-hour helpline for chartered accountants. 'Colleagues may feel pressured into taking sides and eventually get thoroughly fed up with listening.'

She adds: 'A negative effect on staff morale can have an impact on the finances of the company. Members of staff who are depressed following the breakdown of a relationship may not be able to concentrate fully and their output may drop. And there could be considerable downtime with groups of people gathering in washrooms or kitchens, comforting a distraught colleague or simply chatting about the situation.'

Staff members are also likely to become disgruntled if they suspect a co-worker is receiving preferential treatment, or even promotion, as a result of a relationship they are having with someone else in the firm.

For this reason Shohet believes that husbands



John Prescott: His two-year affair with Tracey Temple was common knowledge in his department.

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Office relationships that didn't work out

Mark Pallos and Faria Alam (and Sven-Goran Eriksson)

The chartered accountant FA chief executive took his eye off the ball when he fell for the charms of secretary Faria Alam. Pallos resigned over the affair, but England football coach Sven-Goran Eriksson managed to hold on to his job despite also having enjoyed a fling with the former model.



Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky

The former US president was impeached following testimony he gave about his relationship with the 21-year-old White House intern. Although he was eventually acquitted, Clinton will be forever haunted by his immortal words, 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.'



Antony and Cleopatra

Mark Antony was one of the three rulers of the Roman Empire, but his relationship with temperamental Egyptian queen Cleopatra was a sticking point with fellow triumvirs, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. The romance ended in tears after Caesar defeated Antony at sea and both lovers committed suicide.



and wives working together in senior positions within the same firm is very bad news. He has known a number of mergers to be called off because the merger would bring spouses together in a partnership: 'Either they will vote together or they will vote against one another, which will create another conflict,' he says.

Romance policies

Only 20% of UK companies have formal policies on how to deal with workplace romances, but they are common in the US. Annette Partridge, an associate in employment law with international law firm, Hogan & Hartson, puts this down to a difference in culture, with American companies having adapted to a highly litigious environment. She says: 'A lot of employers have policies in place that do not allow office relationships, particularly where someone senior is having a relationship with someone junior because it raises problems with confidentiality, sexual discrimination and harassment.'

Richard Smith, an HR consultant with Croner, sister company of *Accountancy's* publisher CCH, believes British companies need to be more proactive. 'You can't legislate against love, but companies should consider issuing guidelines to employees on acceptable behaviour if they have relationships with a colleague and must include clearly defined grievance processes. It shouldn't be

seen as a punitive action against employees, but it is a way of protecting them against unfair suspicion and treatment.'

One firm that has a formal policy is Ernst & Young. Stevan Rolls, national director of resourcing and employee relations, describes the policy as 'straightforward and very commonsense.'

'The key thing is if you're involved in an office relationship, you're responsible for telling your manager so any conflicts of interest can be managed,' he says. 'The worst scenario is when someone knows something is going on that has not surfaced formally.'

Rolls concedes office attachments aren't great for business, but doesn't necessarily think they're bad for business either. 'When you're dealing with large organisations like us, you have to realise that friendships form in the office and some are going to grow into more than that,' he says. 'Wouldn't it be great if any relationship we had at work didn't complicate the working relationship and there were never conflicts of interest? But that's not the real world.'

The number of the YouCount free confidential 24-hour helpline for chartered accountants and their families, run by the Chartered Accountants Benevolent Association, is 0800 107 6163