

Romance in the workplace

With employees increasingly working long hours, romantic relationships at work are likely to happen more frequently, but what are the dos and don'ts?

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Problems

Falling in love with a work colleague can lead to all sorts of problems, ranging from conflicts of interest to sexual harassment claims. Relationships between managers and subordinates are particularly difficult, especially if they result in one partner being able to influence the other's career prospects or remuneration. Affairs involving directors can be costly, if they become public because of the potential damage to an organisation's reputation.

Policies

A policy simply banning romantic relationships at work will probably not be enforceable; in addition to the practical difficulties involved, it potentially breaches human rights legislation. Such policies also encourage employees to keep their relationships a secret, which will prevent an employer managing any fall-out if the relationship goes sour.

The best approach is a policy that encourages disclosing the relationship at an early stage so that potential problems can be avoided. The policy should give guidance on acceptable behaviour both during and after a relationship ends. It should also strike a balance between protecting the interests of the organisation and the rights of the employees concerned to a private life.

Practical tips

- Ask employees to disclose romantic relationships as soon as possible to avoid later problems, and undertake to keep the relationship confidential as far as possible, if the employees wish it.
- Indicate that the organisation does not encourage relationships between line managers and subordinates, because of the potential for favouritism or unequal treatment, potentially leading to discrimination claims.
- Warn that it may be necessary to separate employees romantically involved with one another, by requiring them to work in different departments, or even different countries, to avoid conflict or embarrassment.
- Require employees to conduct themselves in a proper manner during a relationship. Define what the organisation considers appropriate and inappropriate behaviour at work. Leave staff in no doubt about what is and is not acceptable.
- Recommend employees seek advice from HR if a relationship, or relationship breakdown, is causing disruption.