

## **The office romance: an HR issue?**

The old adage 'never mix business with pleasure' warns us of the dangers of the office romance. Despite the taboo, recent research suggests that personal relationships at work may be on the rise. Results from preliminary surveys in Australia and overseas also suggest that the office romance may, in some circumstances, have a positive impact on productivity.

### **Literature on romance at work**

While romance at work has long been a social taboo, the issue has also been a 'research taboo'. Only a handful of social science researchers have attempted to map the impact of work-romance on individuals, workplace politics and culture. Charles Pierce, Professor of Psychology at Montana State University is the most published researcher on the issue. Quinn in the 1970s<sup>i</sup>, and Warfield<sup>ii</sup> in the 1980s were among the first academics to give the issue serious consideration.

While the academic world appears hesitant to investigate the issue, the popular press has been vocal. Pop psychologists and career coaches are unequivocal on the dangers of the office romance.

*"...one or both may have to consider moving to another department or even to another company if the romance gets very heated or if it ends".*

*"...casual not close or best friendships are preferable in business...Adhere to the "three year" rule by only gradually letting a workplace or business acquaintanceship become a friendship; even then try to keep it a casual, non-intimate friendship"<sup>iii</sup>.*

Pop psychology has generally focused on the personal implications of work romance for individuals. Moving beyond the personal realm, how should HR managers handle 'romance' as a workplace issue? Is it necessary for workplaces to develop an organisational response?

### **Is 'sex' really a workplace issue?**

Sex, and sexual politics, are controversial issues for the workplace to address. To date, the focus of managers has been to address and eradicate sexual behaviour at work that is *not* mutually consenting. The federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 has provisions specifically relating to sexual harassment. The business world has taken this issue very seriously. Employers, unsure of how to meet their responsibilities under the Act, lobbied for the development of

guidelines on implementation. As a result, the Sexual Harassment Code of Practice was drafted. Obviously, the eradication of harassment and discrimination have been top priorities for businesses. But how should a business view consenting personal relationships that may develop as a result of work-based relationships?

Research in Australia and overseas shows that very few businesses have formal policies on intimate relationships between work colleagues. In the studies of Hancock<sup>iv</sup> and Warfield et al<sup>v</sup>, only a minority of managers reported having a formal workplace policy on interpersonal/intimate relationships between colleagues. As Hancock highlights however, most workplaces have informal policies or 'views' on the appropriateness of such relationships. HR managers are generally reluctant to endorse or approve of intimate relationships developing between co-workers.

### **Why managers are 'cold' on the 'hot and heavy'**

There are many obvious reasons why personal relationships at work would concern HR managers:

- ? Private life and work life have traditionally been considered very separate realms. As Hancock states "...organisations themselves tend not to see workplace romance and other socio-sexual behaviour as being related to their cultural make up"<sup>vi</sup>.
- ? The impact for productivity and performance is unclear. Some researchers draw the conclusion that workplace romance does not have a positive impact on the productivity of the workers involved, or co-workers. However, an alternative case is put by Quinn<sup>vii</sup> and more recently, Pierce (1996). Pierce claims that workplace romance can have a positive impact on work performance. Cooperation and improved communication are cited as positive outcomes that can emerge. *"In certain circumstances, office relationships can be OK...in fact, they can be beneficial if employees channel romantic energy to work tasks. They may bring more enthusiasm to the job."*<sup>viii</sup>
- ? There may be an appearance of impropriety, if the relationship occurs between a senior and junior member of staff. For example, in a US study, intimate relationships between bosses and subordinates were found to undermine morale at the workplace<sup>ix</sup>.
- ? There may be confusion between 'sexual harassment' and sexually 'consenting' behaviour. Dealing with cases of sexual harassment is one of the most provocative and sensitive areas of human resource management. In some cases, establishing a case of 'harassment' can be extremely difficult, even where substantial evidence exists. Dealing with

the ambiguities raised by reciprocated and welcome sexual behaviour and unreciprocated and unwelcome sexual behaviour may be extremely difficult.

- ? The break-up or termination of the intimate relationship, by one or both parties, may cause difficulties and tensions within the organisation. In a US study, cited by Hancock, one quarter of the human resource personnel interviewed for the survey claimed that sexual harassment claims in their organisations were the direct result of unsuccessful workplace romances<sup>x</sup>. As some researchers have noted, the workplace can become the forum for revenge, bitterness and anger between the parties on dissolution of the relationship. Even the romantic Shakespeare acknowledged this danger when he said '*Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds*'.

### **Research findings to date**

Recent research is broadening our understanding of the issue, and its implications for personnel management.

#### Intimate relationships on the rise?

While not definitive, preliminary research shows that workplace romance may be on the rise<sup>xi</sup>. Two possible explanations have been proposed:

- ? The increased participation of women in the workforce, and particularly of women in non-traditional sectors and occupations<sup>xii</sup>;
- ? The increased proportion of people spending longer hours at work. In other words, more time at work means that workers have greater opportunity to mix with and develop closer relationships with co-workers.

#### Is the pattern of romantic relationships across industry and workplace size uniform?

Studies overseas have found that workplace setting, and workplace size do influence the likelihood for romantic relationships to emerge at the workplace. In the 1980s, Dillard & Witteman found that intimate relationships with work colleagues were more likely to occur in organisations with less than 50 workers<sup>xiii</sup>. Other researchers have noted that the actual proximity between work colleagues can affect the likelihood of intimate relationships commencing. For example, a close physical environment at work and the likelihood of time away from the office together can be factors in the commencement of an intimate relationship between work colleagues<sup>xiv</sup>.

In contrast, preliminary research in Australia has not shown a distinctly different pattern in the incidence of workplace romance across industry or workplace<sup>xv</sup>.

## Co-worker acceptance

Preliminary research findings show a high level of acceptance of work romance from co-workers, however there are conditions on this acceptance. Hancock argues that co-workers appear more likely to accept a work romance between people at the 'same level' in the occupational hierarchy. Relationships between managers and subordinates were generally not approved of.

### **Where to from here?**

The genuine implications of workplace romance are not currently understood by researchers or organisations. This means that HR managers, should they choose to actively manage the issue, head into uncharted and potentially dangerous territory. Further research and analysis is necessary to determine whether:

- ? Formal organisational policies are required.
- ? How these policies might be appropriately drafted so that (1) respect for the privacy of individuals is maintained and (2) the needs of the organisation are met.

Some useful interim measures that could be considered by HR practitioners include:

- ? A well resourced counselling service to provide workers with the opportunity to discuss personal concerns privately.
- ? Ensuring that the workforce is aware of, and comprehends the sexual harassment policy in place at the organisation.
- ? Quality 'people management' training for frontline managers.

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<sup>i</sup> Quinn R 1977 Coping with cupid: the formation, impact and management of romantic relationships in organizations *Administrative Science Quarterly* 22: 30-45

<sup>ii</sup> Warfield A, Swartz A & D Wood 1987 Co worker romances: impact on the work group and on the career oriented women *Personnel* 64, 5: 22-35

<sup>iii</sup> See comments of Jan Yager at <http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/yager.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Hancock A 'Romance in the workplace: attitudes and practices in Australian organisations - unpublished thesis submitted as part of Bachelor of Economics Honours Degree at Department of Work and Organisational Studies, University of Sydney November 2001

<sup>v</sup> Warfield et al.

<sup>vi</sup> Hancock 2001: 14

<sup>vii</sup> Quinn R 1977. As cited by Hancock: 19

<sup>viii</sup> See an interview with Charles Pierce at [http://www.womensfinance.com/the\\_workplace/dating.asp](http://www.womensfinance.com/the_workplace/dating.asp)

<sup>ix</sup> As cited by Hancock 2001: 11

<sup>x</sup> Hancock 2001: 22.

<sup>xi</sup> Hancock 2001.

<sup>xii</sup> See Anderson & Hunsaker 1985, as cited by Hancock 2001

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<sup>xiii</sup> Dillard J & Witteman H 1985 Romantic relationships at work: organizational and personal influences *Human Communication Research* 12, 1: 99-116

<sup>xiv</sup> Pierce C 1998 Factors associated with participation in a romantic relationship in a work environment *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 28, 18: 1712-1730

<sup>xv</sup> Hancock.