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Managing Office Romance: Is There a Policy for Mixing Business With Pleasure?

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At a 2002 Christmas party for Australian Embassy staff in Moscow, Natalia Komarova, the embassy's Russian-born public diplomacy officer and Bruce Jones, a recently arrived political officer, met and immediately struck up a friendship. Several months later, when friendship blossomed into romance, the pair reported their relationship immediately to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), as required by the code of conduct outlined in their employment contracts.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was called to look into Komarova's background. "They had to make sure I was not a Russian spy," says Komarova, who is now public relations manager at the University of New South Wales' campus at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. "I had to provide information about my parents, about places I'd been and people I'd worked for. Bruce was terribly apologetic throughout the process."

Twelve months later the couple applied for de facto status and again the Russian PR professional required ASIO clearance. "This time the check was more thorough," Komarova recalls. "They wanted to know, among other things, where my father and sister had travelled and why. I was given clearance after a very thorough check, but the process itself was not unexpected. It was outlined clearly within DFAT policies." In 2006, Komarova and Jones were married and today they live in Australia with their 22-month-old son.

Office romances are not usually so dramatic in terms of policy requirements, not least because few organisations have guidelines to address the many potential issues that can emerge. A survey conducted by psychologist Geoff Carter at Queensland's Griffith University, shows eight out of 10 employees between the ages of 18 and 40 have been involved in some sort of sexual encounter with a work colleague, and it's hardly surprising. Increasing time demands being placed on staff – particularly since the global financial crisis – may have inadvertently turned the workplace into a social hub. A time-use study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals that in 1992, people socialised outside of work for 77 minutes every day, but by 2008, that socialising time was down to just 10 minutes. Several US studies also have shown that between 33% and 40% of romantic relationships these days begin in the office.

Literature on this topic is filled with high-profile examples of successful, and not-so-successful, office romances. For example, Microsoft founder Bill Gates met his wife, Melinda, four months after she had become an intern at the company. Together they now successfully run the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. But the course of intra-office romance does not always run smoothly. Mark Everson, the president and chief executive of the American Red Cross, resigned in 2007 after his affair with a subordinate came to light. Harry Stonecipher, president and chief executive of Boeing, was forced to resign in 2005 due to an extra-marital relationship with a colleague, whom he later wed. The careers of world leaders, notably the former US president Bill Clinton and former British deputy prime minister John Prescott, suffered negative effects from extra-marital office flings. In Australia, TV presenters Stan Grant and Tracey Holmes found themselves momentarily in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons when their romantic involvement was revealed.

Long-term relationships – such as Komarova's and Jones's – are the positive side, the result of courtships well managed by both the employer and the couple, serendipitous good luck not withstanding. But there's

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a downside to office romances that needs to be addressed with processes and guidelines.

Not Everyone's in Love

Whether participants are famous or not, office liaisons generate controversy. "There can be perceptions of favouritism by other people in the office when a romance begins," says Dallas Burgess, an organisational psychologist from Sydney-based consultancy PeopleAdvantage. He lists a series of common problems. "There will likely be perceptions of conflict of interest and real conflict of interest," Burgess says. "Pillow talk inevitably happens and impacts on other staff members and provokes jealousy on the part of other staff. There can be disruptions in achieving work goals, often because of the emotional tensions in the office. (Intra-office relationships) can warp the nature of the workplace and affect people and their morale. There may be bloody outcomes when it all blows up because people are not talking and people in the office take sides. It saps energy from productive work into destructive by-ways."

Julie Cogin, head of Organisation and Management at the Australian School of Business, says office romances present a high risk with the likelihood that one party will exit the organisation. "This can occur if the relationship breaks down or as a result of both parties wishing to avoid allegations of favouritism," she says. "Either way, the organisation assumes the cost of replacing an employee."

A paper published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, titled *The Debate Over the Prohibition of Romance in the Workplace* by Colin Boyd, a professor at Edwards Business School at the University of Saskatchewan, says organisations perceive two major threats from office romances. "First, there is the possibility that if this workplace romance breaks down, then one partner's attempts at reconciliation may come to be perceived by the other former partner as harassment," Boyd says. "The employer may be held responsible for not protecting that employee from such harassment. Second, if the relationship is between a superior and a subordinate, there is the possibility that one of the subordinate's co-workers might sue because of real or perceived favouritism arising from the relationship."

Cogin says that while office romances are a natural consequence of longer working hours, productivity losses can be incurred through others gossiping about the relationship. Also, harassment may not just come about if the relationship breaks down, the harassment can also take place against the couple by other employees.

Such fears have led some organisations to issue consensual dating agreements when a romance surfaces, Boyd notes. Known as "love contracts", "dating waivers" or "cupid contracts", these agreements seek to confirm that the relationship is consensual, will not result in favouritism and that neither partner will take action against the organisation should the relationship break down. But this proves an inadequate solution as it potentially violates privacy rights. So when addressing matters of the heart, what should an employer do?

It's important to face up to the reality that today many relationships begin in the workplace. There's an increasing probability of personal relationships developing as people spend more time at work, says Cherie Curtis, head of psychology at psychometric testing agency, Onetest. "People are not really engaging with social opportunities in other environments, so they start to consider the workplace a viable place to pursue those opportunities. And, when people work closely in stressful circumstances, a bond naturally forms."

Curtis says research has shown the physical changes that occur when someone is under pressure at work – increased heart rate, blood pressure going up, sweating – are the same physiological changes triggered by love or passion. "It is easy for those symptoms to be misinterpreted or transferred," she says.

It makes sense for businesses to develop rules of engagement, rather than attempting to outlaw relationships at work altogether, Curtis believes. Strong policies can provide clear guidelines and boundaries that safeguard all staff when a romance occurs. "For example, a comprehensive and enforceable harassment policy is critical, but must be accessible and easy to understand," Curtis says. "A very clear and accessible complaint procedure is also vital. Putting such policies into practice is what distinguishes great organisations – employees are aware of the policies. Equally important is thorough training of managers to ensure they can handle the responsibilities involved in supervising others."

Anecdotal evidence suggests many office romances last because one partner makes the decision to leave

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the organisation – but such loss of talent may be equally damaging for the business, Curtis points out. "Despite the perception that workplace relationships cause a drop in productivity, studies have shown that productivity and performance do not fall as a result of office romance," she reports.

Burgess agrees clear ethical standards, codes of conduct and guidelines are necessary for the positive management of intra-office relationships, in the same way that organisations must provide guidelines for other behaviours, including bullying. Contracts of employment for managers should include a description of the code of conduct and what is required in terms of ethical behavioural standards, Burgess emphasises. "Office romances can impact on how an entire organisation functions – the smaller the office, the greater the impact. When a manager is involved, people lose trust in that manager resulting in a dysfunctional department."

Rules for Romance

However, workplace romances are difficult to regulate because there are fundamental rights of privacy and freedom of association, particularly across genders, says Peter Wilson, national president of the Australian Human Resources Institute, who also notes long work hours and gender equality have brought relevance to this issue. "With female workforce participation almost equalling males, then – of course – lots of people meet at work, become attracted to each other and become involved in relationships," he says.

Wilson offers three informal guiding principles around the issue of workplace romance:

1. "Whether you're a boss, a staff member or one of the people in the relationship, don't be worried if a romance happens because it is going to happen an awful lot. A recent US survey showed about 40% of long-term relationships begin at work.
2. "Those involved should opt for early disclosure rather than to try to keep it covert. The rumour mill is powerful and people read into body language and other signals. Anyone who thinks they can keep it covert is unlikely to be successful. Also, people will feel disrespected if they hear about it from somebody other than one of the people in the relationship. There's a risk of putting people offside.
3. "There's a problem when the relationship occurs between a boss and a subordinate – then it's necessary for one of the two parties to consider moving. Otherwise, third parties may believe or suspect that their rights or treatment may be affected negatively."

In wording policies around workplace romance, Wilson warns against being too prescriptive. "It doesn't write easily," he says. "You've got to be very careful that you don't inadvertently affect principles of privacy or natural justice. We are in a democratic society and people are free to choose."

However, Burgess recommends conditions of employment include policies, guidelines and codes of conduct in regards to office romance, as DFAT's did in the case of Komarova and Jones. "Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) legislation includes psychological harm," he says. "The legislation is quite clear on these things so a board or management team that does not address something that is harmful can be in breach of OH&S legislation."

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