

Is it okay to date people at work?

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

Yes, but before you do, pay attention to what's going on around you first. What seems to be the practice where you work? It may not be okay in the culture. One young theatre group made it a no-no. They had a mission to make this theatre successful, and they made a pact not to date each other, fearing that grand passions and dramatic endings would interfere with their work.

If you both work for a big company, dating might not get in the way of a professional relationship; you might not have serious work contact with each other, or work at a distance. In a small company, though, your relationship hits the front page of the water cooler gazette, and the fact of it keeps buzzing like a fly trapped in a light shade. It also makes a dispassionate work relationship tougher.

If two people date and get married, can the company keep them from working together? Years ago, when the couple married, one had to resign, and it was usually the woman. Today is different. Some companies still have an anti-nepotism policy like that, but it's generally reserved for direct working relationships or where one position is sensitive to the other (one needs to transfer to a different part of the company). Some companies don't pay attention to any relationship issue. Bottom line: Check your employee manual.

Cooing office couples have two misconceptions. One is that they can successfully hide this relationship. People in love are like toddlers who, when they cover their eyes, believe you can't see them! There are people who practically make a career of sniffing out new relationships and announcing them to the employee lunch bunch. You have to be an Oscar-quality actor to get much past them. The office audience loves it even more when the lovebirds pretend indifference to each other.

The other misconception is that they, the lovers, are the endless focus of the gossip-mongers. Truth is, people mong the gossip for a few days and then move on to the next delicious target. So, let people know, let them talk, and keep your work relationship at the forefront, which means you keep the smooch notes to a minimum.

What are some of the problems with dating people at work? The biggest problems with dating co-workers arise when the relationship ends and we all have to behave in a grown-up, civilized way without tears or hissed arguments in the hall; in short, like we weren't previously madly in love with each other. Additional problems: One or both of you is married. One of you is the boss. It's only over for one of you.

Regarding the already wed thing, Dear Abby has told you a million times this was going to end in tears. It's just a mess. The married stay married; the single stay miserable; the co-workers don't approve (though they may understand miserable failed marriages); the company doesn't like the work not getting done because of the boiling relationships. I know that people will fall in love, no matter how impractical for their careers. If you do,

just do everything you can to keep it on your own time. Your wonderful, romantic song of forbidden love clashes with the hum of commerce.

The same goes for falling in love with the boss (which adds a measure of titillation to the lunch crowd buzz). If you're remarkably professional, the organization will barely tolerate you. You will, however, experience unavoidable resentment because you have the boss' ear in a very different way than the others. It's an advantage and everyone knows it, including you. So, don't be surprised if your friendships change, especially if the boss is married. For many people this is a moral issue.

Actually, no matter how liberal your company is, you'll be smart over the long term to assume it's philosophically conservative and behave accordingly. Be circumspect about sharing any non-mainstream relationships. Yes, Ellen came out on national television, and yes, people are more accepting of different choices; however, there are hard-core judgmental, often powerful people in the organization who may be tolerant of knowledge, but intolerant of what they'll see as flaunting what feels too outside the norm.

There are many companies and fields and places where acceptance of difference is high. Go there if you're only comfortable in that environment. But walk carefully if you're in mainstream businesses. I don't care how many diversity workshops they sponsor. It takes longer for people outside the norm — whether it's age, dress, race, sexual preference — to find acceptance. And that's true if you're a straight in a gay business or a white in a black law firm. You're the non-norm and less accepted.

Then the end of the relationship comes, at least for one of you. How do you craft a different relationship? How do you work together when one or more hearts have been broken? This is where you see the wisdom of the theatrical manager who, in proclaiming his decision not to date people in the company, said, "Dogs don't sh-- where they eat." If you don't date in the first place, you don't have the picking-up-the-pieces problem in the second place.

How should you play the end of love? The water's under the bridge and you're broken-hearted. What do you do? If you've kept your relationship fairly private, you'll have less difficulty mending. If you're fair to each other, you'll have a conversation about how to deal with the work thing, so you can establish behavioral agreements. And do behave. The organization that loved you as lovebirds is annoyed when you bring your sputtering flame of love to work.

It will feel impossible to you if you're the one who's been left, but you have to be tough. Put cold used teabags on your eyes to bring the swelling down before you go to work, put on your professional armor and don't let people poke around on it; plan every single minute of every single day so you don't burst into tears sitting at your computer; then go home and cry your eyes out. The first two weeks will be miserable, and then you'll find yourself becoming gradually better.