

Working Solutions

Dating at Work: Do or Don't?

Statistics tell us that nearly half of today's married couples met at work. But statistics don't tell us about office disruptions caused by relationships that didn't work out. As social life and work life intertwine, we need to practice the defensive arts of good manners and etiquette. Among other things, courtesy is discreet—and when it comes to dating in the workplace, discretion is the better part of survival. The less you bring your personal relationship to work, the less it will harm your career.

If you're lucky, your company has a written dating policy. Unfortunately, most offices don't. **Dating policies are designed to protect everyone against discomfort and legal liability.** If you're single, you should become familiar with your employer's policy—before a specific need arises. Couples also must be aware of dating policies when they begin relationships. Some policies require that you tell management about your relationship, especially when people of unequal ranks are concerned. Some policies may require that one partner transfer to a new department if both partners work in the same department. Others require partners to sign a contract of consent, agreeing not to bring suit against the company or each other if the relationship sours.

If your company has no formal policy, take an objective look at the corporate culture. The only way to survive, much less thrive, in any company is to learn to function within the organization according to its rules, many of which are unwritten. No matter what your corporate culture is, **the first rule of workplace romance is don't advertise it.** You can be sure that coworkers and top brass alike will be much more tolerant of the relationship if they don't feel awkward about it. Not only should you refrain from discussing your relationship with anyone in the office, your guard should go up if someone asks you about it, especially when your relationship is new. You might respond to such questions by saying, "Why would you ask me that?" Your professional behavior will defend you against office gossip. And if you decide to end the romance in its formative stage, you'll be glad you never discussed it with anyone.

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Work life gets especially dicey when a supervisor dates a subordinate. Even when both people are completely professional, the supervisor will likely be viewed as playing favorites, and the subordinate's professional contributions will be diminished or dismissed. Even if the relationship dies, those perceptions will live on. Both parties may be remembered for the affair rather than for any business accomplishments. Think about it: If someone asks you for the first thing that comes to mind about the Clinton presidency, you'll probably name Monica Lewinsky.

But suppose your relationship blossoms into something wonderful and likely to last. However, your office frowns upon dating among coworkers. In such a case, your choices may include one partner transferring departments or finding a new job outside the company. These choices shouldn't be made in a vacuum—they affect not only two individuals, but also the department and the company. After your relationship has stood the test of some time (let's say three months), it's a good idea to speak confidentially to your supervisor or human resources person about your options. No company wants to lose good people, especially when they're doing their best to play by its rules.

Here are some “don'ts” to help you steer clear of romantic disasters at work:

Don't date someone you have trouble working with. You need to feel secure about a work relationship before you take it to another level.

Don't carry out your courtship on company time. Everybody loves a lover—for about five minutes. Then those romantic rituals (frequent trips past each other's desks, instant messaging all day long,) become sophomoric intrusions on the workplace.

Don't stay at office parties later than 6 p.m., especially if you've paired up with a coworker. Lingering at a party's end signals that you're inviting further partying. If you leave late with someone, tongues will wag about how you spent the rest of the evening, even if you just walked

to the bus together and went your separate ways. When it comes to office parties, the emphasis belongs on the “office,” not the “party.”

Don't discuss troubles between you and your spouse or lover. If you're troubled about a relationship, talk to a trustworthy friend outside the workplace or call AWP (800-343-3822).

Don't repeat risqué stories or jokes. People might see them as come-ons or simply embarrassing. Besides, although few will express their discomfort and disapproval, you may end up excluded from important projects, meetings and social events for reasons you're never told.

Don't talk about your body, especially anything you feel needs expansion or reduction. That kind of talk can sound like a come-on, or at least create a sexually uncomfortable atmosphere.

Don't discuss sexual experiences with coworkers. It's bad manners because such confessions are rarely comfortable conversations, yet the listener seldom dares say, “That's really a whole lot more than I want to hear.” Also, don't count on your secrets staying secret.

Don't even think about dating someone who's married.

Don't ever say to a coworker, “If I weren't involved with someone, I could get into a lot of trouble with you.” Sounds corny, but variations on this theme are alive and well. Although it might be said without guile, you don't want to learn later that you seemingly made a pass at someone.

While some office romances may go undiscovered, what's more likely is that office lovebirds may just have their heads in the clouds. Keep in mind that even when nothing's happening, offices are full of gossip. At the very least, remain mum about those early casual dates. It's your private business, and you should keep it private. Your relationship may not last. If it doesn't, you'll still have to work with someone who once was your lover, and you'll be glad you were discreet. ■ **Source:** Mitchell, Mary. (n.d.). *The Dating Game Has Strict Rules at Work*. Retrieved May 18, 2005, from the Epotech database.

What is the “Scoop” on Coffee?

Excited about recent research touting the benefits of drinking coffee? Many studies contradict each other.

Recent articles in clinical nutrition journals have praised coffee’s benefits, but others aren’t so glowing. If you do drink coffee, moderation is a good rule to follow. Recent findings include coffee’s benefit of improving reaction time, mental acuity, alertness, and mood, as well as its extra benefit of possessing antioxidants that help prevent deterioration of your body’s cells. ■



The Art of Apology

There will always be upset customers. And it’s common knowledge that they repeat their stories of disappointment to other potential customers, costing businesses millions of dollars. So, if you deal with customers, and practically all of us do, consider learning the art of an apology so you can have the best shot at maintaining business. The formula:

- 1) **Start** with an explanation of what happened;
- 2) **Make** assurances—then act to make sure the customer will be taken care of; and
- 3) **Acknowledge** the error or bad experience and express regret for its occurrence. ■

What’s Al-Anon?

It is estimated that an alcoholic affects the lives of at least four other people, which is why it is often called a “family disease.” Al-Anon is a 12-step, self-help group created more than 50 years ago, not long after Alcoholics Anonymous began. Three types of people can potentially benefit greatly from Al-Anon: those troubled by someone else’s drinking, those who grew up with a problem drinker, and those whose lives have been affected by someone else’s drinking. Could Al-Anon help you? Learn more by calling AWP’s 24 hour call center at 800-343-3822. ■

Surviving the Performance Improvement Plan

If you have received a performance improvement plan (PIP) from management, you are undoubtedly concerned about ensuring that its requirements are met. Certainly it is an anxious time, but the following attitude and action guidelines can help:

- 1) **The PIP is not a disciplinary action.** It is an opportunity for you to demonstrate acceptable performance commensurate with your duties and responsibilities.
- 2) **Get going.** The PIP has a time frame, and many employees put it aside, never attending to the plan’s requirements until it is too late.
- 3) **Contact AWP for support.** Seek our advice on what personal issues to consider and on work strategies to help you be successful with the plan. (Call 800-343-3822.)
- 4) **Be proactive** in seeking out feedback, asking for help, and using organizational resources available to employees.
- 5) **Never wonder** what your boss is thinking about your performance—instead, ask.
- 6) If your supervisor has not told you what he or she thinks contributes to your work-related difficulties, **ask.**
- 7) **Do an honest assessment** of your attitude and behavior. If issues contribute to your performance problems, face them head-on. ■



The Benefit of Conferences

Meeting others and networking is a highly touted benefit of attending professional conferences. However, one of the most unsung benefits is the new and exciting ideas that will pop into your head as others speak. They can be worth a fortune. These ideas can improve your productivity and solve major problems for your employer. Great ideas can last but a second, so create a system to capture them on paper—in a journal or diary. Stay energized (awake), particularly in the afternoon, by sitting up front in meeting rooms. Even boring presentations can sound more exciting the closer you are to them. Exciting presentations will be twice as stimulating in the front of the room. Don't fill every midday and evening break with social activity. Use some of it for "alone time" to consider what you are learning and experiencing. ■



Confidence: Get More of It!

Having confidence is like a boomerang: the more you project it, the more life's opportunities come your way. Everyone wants to feel and look confident, but is there a way to acquire or build confidence to improve its benefits if you're a bit lacking? Follow these key steps to building self-confidence, and watch opportunities come your way:

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- 1) **Get past the "superior" or "stuck-up" myth.** Acting self-confident is not being superior to others. It's about feeling competent that you will meet life's challenges successfully.
- 2) **Understand that confidence** comes from taking action and meeting challenges, refusing to always play it safe, and making decisions that put you—not others—in control of your life.
- 3) **Accept that everyone** lacks self-confidence sometimes, although they may be competent in many areas.
- 4) **When you feel lacking** in self-confidence, stop short of putting yourself down. If necessary, remind yourself of past personal accomplishments, drawn from your memory, when you demonstrated confidence.
- 5) **Like a garden,** self-confidence is nurtured. Being willing to make decisions, overcome resistance to new challenges, learn from life's experiences, and steer your life in a direction that matches your values will build self-confidence.
- 6) **Think about which successes** in your life have created the most excitement and enjoyment. These reflect your values. Consider using these values as guides for other decisions going forward, and your confidence may grow rapidly. ■



Your EAP is designed to help you deal with life stresses and a variety of personal challenges. For confidential services offered at no cost to all employees and their families, please call:



Toll Free (800) 343-3822
TDD (800) 448-1823
Teen Line (800) 334-8336 (TEEN)
E-mail: eap@alliancewp.com
Web: www.alliancewp.com

Alliance Work Partners is a professional service of Workers Assistance Program, Inc.



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