

## **ROMANCE AT WORK AND THE NEGATIVE IMPACT IT HAS ON THE WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT**

**Razvan V. BALABAN**

National University for Political Studies and Public Administration  
Bucharest, Romania  
*razvan.balaban@dri.snsa.ro*

**Abstract** *In the 21<sup>st</sup> century people spend even more time at their work place, the interaction between female and male co-workers, increases due the time spend, which studies showed has a direct correlation with them being involved in romantic relationships. This paper is trying to show how companies should reacted to two co-workers being romantically involved, and how their relationship might affect the organization and the interaction between the ones involved in a romantic relationship and the rest of the company.*

**Keywords** *Workplace romance, human resources, organizational behaviour, business management, and organization impact.*

In contrast to meeting at the disco, heading to see a movie, date in high school or university, the workplace is rapidly becoming a desirable location to meet and fall in love with a romantic partner (Pierce, 1998). Indeed, researchers have indicated that workplace romance, or romantic relationships between two members of the same organization that are characterized by mutual sexual attraction, are rampant (Mainiero, 1989).

The sexual integration of the workforce in the past few decades has increased the frequency of intimate contact between male and female employees (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996), thereby enhancing the likelihood of romantic relationships in the workplace (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). Indeed approximately 80 per cent of the employees in the U.S. report different types of social-sexual experience at their job (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996), including mutually desired, fun loving, passionate romantic affiliations with their nearby co-workers. Similarly, Dillard and Wietteman (1985) reported that nearly 75 per cent of the individuals they interviewed had either observed or participated in a romantic relationship at work.” Corporate romance is as inevitable as earthquakes in California” (Westhoff, 1985, p.21).

Becoming an increasing phenomenon, romance at work caught the attention of many writers in literature, many of them having tried to explain the formation of romantic relation at work and the impact of it on the company environment.

This article attempts to show, based on existing literature on the topic, why organizations would wish to ban romantic relationships at work, if it is better to ignore them or to take action in favour of against romance at work based on the consequences that they might have.

Literature on office romances is replete with examples of positive and negative effects on the couple, their careers, their co-workers, and their companies. Researchers report negative effects such as co-workers disapproval, cynicism, and hostility (Hoffman, Clinebell, and Kilpatrick). Kennedy (1992) suggests isolation, destabilizing work

relationships, co-worker anxiety, and co-worker jealousies results from office romances (Hoffman, Clinebell, and Kilpatrick). Several sources believe that office romances disrupt the lines of previous communications, previous relationships, and informal alliances. Co-workers are usually concerned that the parties will exhibit favouritism and provide employment benefits to each other not given to other co-workers (Hoffman, Clinebell, and Kilpatrick). Management and legal literature accentuates the negative rather than the positive impact of romance on the participants, managers and organization as a whole (Riach and Wilson, 2006). Workplace romance may result in conflicts of interest, biased decision making and other inequities that negatively affect the performance, should the romance terminate (Mainiero, 1989) or be extramarital (Riach and Wilson, 2006). An example given by the case study made by Riach and Wilson (2006) showed that a manager noted that romance can give the individual a motive for coming to work, but costumers and other staff might see the romantic behaviour as negative; it could even attract the wrong employee. The same research, conducted by the two authors, Riach and Wilson, on a big number of employees and managers from a bar chain showed the negative outcomes of romance in that particular area, such as a chef not cleaning up the kitchen properly because he was having a relationship with a member of the bar staff and spending too much time in front of house fights, 'morning-after awkwardness', not working well enough for a while.

When co-workers become romantically involved with each other, a personal domain is added that cannot be reached by other co-workers (Brown and Rice, 1995). This causes problems throughout the work group, particularly when participants are of different organizational status (Brown and Rice, 1995). This leads to a potential power imbalance, and if that exists then exploitation and work group dysfunction may also exist (Brown and Rice, 1995).

Aspects that negatively affect the company environment are in the figure provided and based on it and literature this article attempts to show different reasons why companies would wish to ban romance from work.

**Figure 1 Negative aspects regarding romance at work**

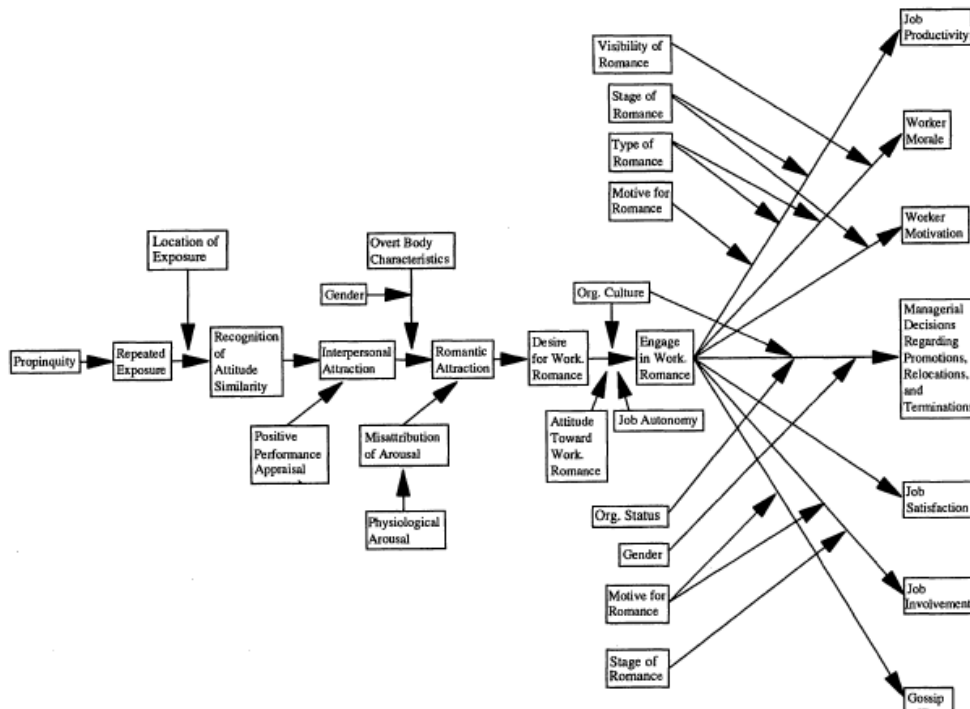


Figure 1. Conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of workplace romance

(Figure 1. Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996)

Companies’ first concern and their reasons to ban organizational romances is job productivity. Researchers have argued that workplace romance should not be of managerial concern unless they disrupt an employee’s performance (Mainiero, 1989). Research addressing workplace romance also indicates, however that such affairs can sometimes have an enhancing, and sometimes an impending, effect on job productivity (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996).

Westhoff discussed job performance and suggested that newly formed couples are initially less productive because of large amounts of time and energy invested in their relationship (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). Consistent with Westhoff’s theorizing, Mainiero (1989) suggested that in the early stages of workplace romance when couples admit their mutual sexual attraction and proceed toward one another, productivity may decline. Even though Quinn and Judge (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996) acknowledge that some couples do become more productive, these authors maintained that is more common to observe a decline in productivity because of the missing meetings, late arrivals and early departures, and costly errors. Accordingly, a substantial portion of foregoing literature indicates that job productivity can be negatively affected by workplace liaisons.

Workplace romance can also have an impact on employee morale; i.e. the mood or spirit of the work group can be influenced by romantic organizational behaviour (Mainiero, 1989). Workplace romance literature suggests that the work mood can be raised as well as lowered because of such affairs. For example, 34 per cent of the executive women surveyed by Mainiero (1989) reported that a workplace romance can energize employee morale. The BNA Quinn and Judge (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996) report suggested that a type of workplace romance can also have an impact on worker morale. In particular, manager-subordinate romances tend to disrupt employee morale more than peer romances do (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). Mainiero (1989) conceded that hierarchical romances can be devastating and destructive because of the employee jealousy and suspicion regarding favouritism. In reference to hierarchical romances and unequal social power, Powell (1993) suggested that work group morale can be negatively affected as the result of a romantic dependency that exists in a boss-subordinate liaison (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996).

Romance at work, particularly those that are highly visible, promote interesting topics of discussion among organizational members (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). Employees who are perceived as being romantically involved with other organization members because of job-related motives are more likely to create negative gossip than employees who are perceived as being romantically involved with other organizational members because of love motives (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). Another important aspect of work place romance and the reason why organizations might wish to ban it is the potential treat of sexual harassment. Many writers in literature treat this as an important reason why senior managers wish to ban or discourage romantic involvement between co-workers.

Unfortunately, office romances may involve employers when the advances are unwelcomed, leading to sexual harassment or when the romance goes “sour” and one party retaliates with a sexual harassment claim (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997). Workplace romances place employers in a dilemma (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997). If a supervisor intervenes prematurely, the company faces the liability of a privacy lawsuit (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997). Conversely, if a company ignores a workplace romance that ends in a sexual harassment claim, it is potentially liable. The U.S. Merit protection board (1981) completed comprehensive surveys of sexual harassment in the Federal government and found that 42 per cent of the female workers and 15 per cent of male workers claimed that have had at least one experience of sexual harassment (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997), the numbers being quite big considering how much a company spends on a sexual harassment claims, figures reaching 8 million dollars per year (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997) and damages include lost productivity, resignations, and decreased morale (Sandroff, 1988).

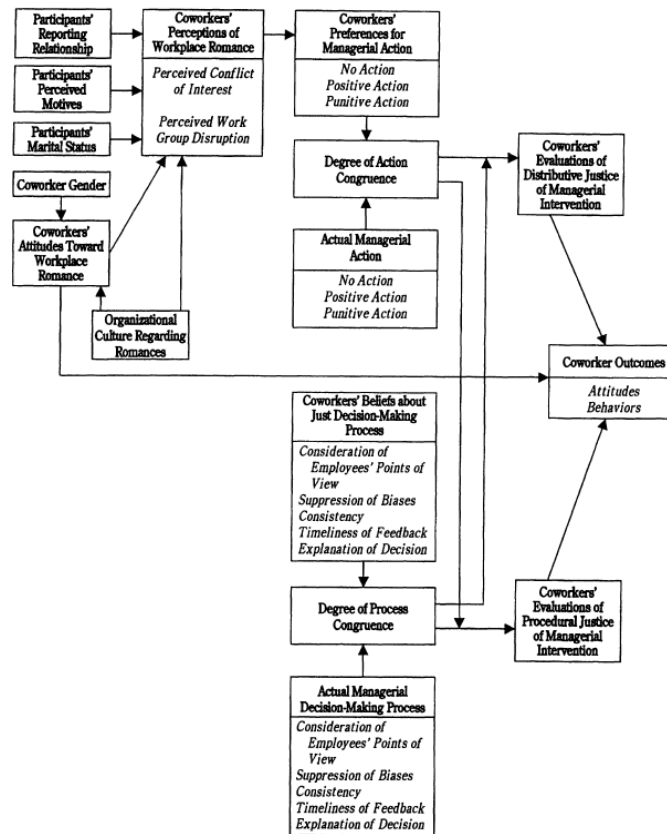
Having reached the point in my argument as to why the managers should not ignore romance at work, because of the consequences that it might have according to Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick (1997), The article will try to show the existent different perspectives in literature regarding if romance at work should or should not be ignored, and it will look at different situations which showed the necessity or argued against a managerial intervention.

Most of the research done on the topic (Mainiero, 1989, Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997, Powell, Wilson, Westhoff, 1985) showed that relationships at work are inevitable, being a natural aspect that might happen when two person work many hours together and have a lot of things in common. The question is if managers should ignore it or take action in favour or against it. Surprisingly, few organizations have policies or procedures to deal with office romance. Anderson and Hunsaker's (1985) survey found that 61 per cent of organizations did not have a policy on office dating, and a 1994 American management association poll showed that 94 per cent of the respondent organizations did not have a written policy on employee dating (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997).

Based on the sexual harassment problem that might have the company liable if it does not take measures against it or is not aware of it Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, (1997) argue that employers cannot now ignore office dating. Organizations need a three-pronged defence for adverse office romance: a supportive corporate culture, comprehensive orientation and training programs covering the issue, and a policy and procedure for dealing with the adverse consequences (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilipatrick, 1997).

Other authors on the same topic have different opinions regarding this issue. Foley and Powell develop a scheme based on their research regarding the need of managerial intervention on working romance. Figure 2 shows co-workers' preferences and responses to managerial interventions regarding workplace romance.

Figure 2. Management intervention



(Figure 2. Foley and Powell 1999)

Foley and Powell (1999) adopt in their research Quinn's (1977) categorization of managerial actions in workplace romance as varying with increasing severity from no action to positive action then to punitive action. From this point on this article will take only into consideration why managers should not take any action against romance at work and in what circumstance they should take such a decision. It is important to note that legal principles may constrain the choices of management actions in different situations with punitive actions being the most likely to be restricted by law (Foley and Powell 1999). Also, participants in workplace romance faced with a managerial action have redress in that they may file lawsuits based on invasion of privacy, wrongful termination, emotional distress and other claims (Foley and Powell 1999).

Managers might ignore romance at workplace, showed in the research conducted by Foley and Powell (1999), until the romance at work does not create any sort of problems from perceived conflict of interest or work group disruption to production performance and job involvement managers should ignore the formed romantic relation and take no action. But what about the fact that romance at work, as shown in the first part of the article, can have negative effects on the company? What should the managers do regarding aspects that affect the company productivity or the work environment creating a tense relation between the co-workers?

Based on the research conducted above and the literature review, this article will try to highlight the decision that managers should take according to the situation presented.

As any concept, workplace romance can have positive or negative consequences on the organization. Literature on this topic is divided between showing the positive aspects of workplace romance on one side and on the other side, showing the negative influences that relationships have on the organizations. As stated at the beginning, this paper mentioned the negative effects that it might have according to the research made but because of the division of the concept arguing in favour or against it, this paper would advise managers to deal with it on a case-by-case situation.

This article will show a few situations and look at what are the expected actions from managers if a romantic relationship happens in their organization.

The results of the research conducted by Brown and Allgeier showed that managers may respond positively to workplace romances if these do not affect uninvolved co-workers, if participant's job performance is not negatively influenced, if participants act professionally, if they are happier, and the participants are single. Managers may respond negatively to workplace romance if the opposite of the above mentioned happened.

In cases of negative effects on the company decisions such as relocating one of the workers involved (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996) is taken. Based on a hypothetical scenario, 41 per cent of the respondents would expect to be transferred and 46 per cent of the respondents would not be expected to be transferred if they participate in such an affair (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). A more negative decision might be to terminate or dismiss an employee because of his or her involvement in a workplace relationship (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996). As with job relocations, terminations represent a punitive form of organizational intervention that should be made judiciously (Pierce, Byrne and Aguinis, 1996).

Another aspect that managers should pay attention to is the type of the relationship that evolves at work and the intention of the participants in that relationship. A co-worker to co-worker relationship has the greatest rights to privacy and employers have fewer rights to intervene unless the relationship affects performance or ends in a sexual harassment claim shows a research made by Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilpatrick (1997). But in a supervisor to subordinate relationship the supervisor has fewer rights and the employers have more rights to intervene because both the company and supervisor are exposed to sexual harassment claims (Hoffman, Clinebell and Kilpatrick, 1997) and can be perceived as a conflict of interest by the other co-workers (Foley and Powell, 1999).

Possible managerial actions ranged in severity from no action (e.g., ignore, feel problem will solve itself, do not want to risk taking action, do not know what to do) to positive action (e.g., openly discuss situation, counsel about what to do) to punitive actions (e.g., reprimand, warn to change behaviour or leave, transfer, terminate) (Foley and Powell, 1999). Quinn (1977) noted that the lower-status participants, typically female, were seen as more dispensable and were more likely to be the target of severe managerial action such as termination. Several universities now prohibit dating between

faculty members and their students as part of their sexual harassment policy (William, Giuffre and Dellinger, 1999). Similarly, many corporations (IBM, General Motors) enforce an anti-dating policy only on supervisors and their subordinates (William, Giuffre and Dellinger, 1999).

Sexuality takes many forms in the workplace, and it has multiple and contradictory meanings and consequences (William, Giuffre and Dellinger, 1999). Various literatures show that organizations attempt to control and to monitor sexual behaviour among workers, but also that workers resist and negotiate these constraints. (William, Giuffre and Dellinger, 1999)

This paper tried to show based on literature on the topic why organization would wish to ban romantic relationships at work and what are the ways in which managers should treat this aspect of organizations.

### References

1. Brown, T., Rice E., (1995). Manager's preceptions of workplace romance: an interview study. *Journal of business and psychology*, vol. 10, no.2 1-8.
2. Fleming, (2006). Sexuality, Power and resistance in the workplace. *Organizational studies*, vol. 28, 239.
3. Foley, S, Powell G (1999). Not all is fair in love and work: co-worker's preferences for and responses to managerial intervention regarding workplace romance. *Journal of organizational behaviour*, vol.24. 1-29.
4. Hoffman, L., Clinebell S., Kilpatrick J. (1997) Office Romance: the new battleground over employees' rights to privacy and the employers' right to intervene. *Employee responsibilities and rights journal*, vol.10, no.4, 1-13.
5. Jones, G (1999). Hierarchical workplace romance: an experiment examination of team members perceptions. *Journal of organizational behaviour*, vol.20, no.7, 1057-1072.
6. Kane, K., Sutton C (2000). An examination of perceived fairness of workplace romance policies. *Journal of business and psychology*, vol.13, no.3, 1-14.
7. Mainiero, L (1986). A review and analysis of power dynamics in organizational romance. *The academy of management review*, vol.11, no.4, 750-762.
8. Pierce, C., Aguinis, H., Adams, S. (2000). Effects of a dissolved workplace romance and rather characteristics on response to sexual harassments accusation. *Journal of organizational behaviour*, vol.17, no.1, 5-32.
9. Powell, G (2001). Workplace romance between senior-level executives and lower-level employees: an issue of work disruption and gender. *Human relations journal*, vol.54, 1519-1544.
10. Shaefer, C., Tudor, T (2001). Managing workplace romance. *Sam advanced management journal*, vol.24.
11. Christine, W., Giuffre, P., Dellinger, K. (1999). Sexuality in the workplace: organizational control, sexual harassment and the pursuit of pleasure. *Annual review of sociology*, vol.25, 73-93.



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 International License.