

## Love In the Time Of Cubicles

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Whenever companies have me help their people build stronger relationships for professional success and personal joy, I always share one powerful point that's quite prominent in my book *Never Eat Alone*: Business relationships are *personal* relationships.

I know this from experience. Some of the best personal friends I've ever had have also been my bosses, colleagues, employees, clients and suppliers. Also, two significant others I had were people I worked with. And according to recent studies, there's a good chance you could say the same.

Four out of ten people recently surveyed by the Society of Human Resource Managers and CareerJournal.com reported that they had dated someone from work. Of the professionals Vault.com polled, 58% said they have done the same at some point in their careers. Heck, 43% said there's at least one romance going right now in their offices!

At first glance, this might seem surprising, now that countless court cases have made sexual harassment training (what a funny name!) as common as coffee breaks throughout so much of corporate America. And you'd be even more shocked if you considered expert legal opinions like the following by Los Angeles-based lawyer Ray Gallo in the February issue of *California Lawyer* magazine:

"The U.S. Supreme Court has recognized a broad right of all citizens to engage in private intimate relationships. But...for now, employers can, with relative confidence, continue to regulate office dating and to enforce anti-fraternization policies that have some reasonably direct relationship to their business goals. And employees should think carefully before becoming intimate with a co-worker."

Despite all the warnings, though, it still seems inevitable that the office will continue to produce romantic relationships. Given how much time, energy and care we devote to our work, there's a good chance that we'll get to know our workmates pretty well. Then, couple the unmistakable monotony of Microsoft Excel with our undeniable human sexual nature, and it only takes a hint of physical attraction to make it more fun to fancy bodies in bedsheets than noses in spreadsheets.

That's not to say that all office romance blossoms as a diversion from work, though. Many times, it's exactly the opposite, and passion for a shared professional purpose is what sparks a new flame.

No romantic relationship starts or survives without passion. Sure, the passion of physical attraction usually abounds in the beginning, but even the intensity in that can't last forever. Both times I was involved with someone from work, it was our shared passion for growing the business and achieving our team's lofty goals that served as the initial foundation for the relationship.

With the common context of work, we derived great joy from sharing our business victories. It also sped the development of emotional intimacy, because we were immediately able to empathize with each other's struggles.

Still, there's much more to making a romantic relationship work than just working together. So even though office romance isn't usually the topic of my relationship tips, here are seven suggestions if you find yourself falling in love during your next lunch break.

- Do a double take: Dating someone from work will not be easy, so don't act on your first fleeting desire. Stop and ask yourself, "Am I really into this person?" If the answer's "No," or even "Not Really," it may be best to continue pursuing love outside the office.
- Take it slow: Try to develop a genuine personal friendship first. This way you can simultaneously increase your certainty about your interest and hedge your bets against making an unwanted advance.
- Discuss "What if...": Most relationships don't last forever, so be prepared for this one ending, too. Talk about how you'll handle working together or moving on professionally like mature adults if a potential romance ended up on the rocks.
- Honesty is the best policy: Many people try to hide office relationships, but most are found out. Covert ops will only damage trust with other co-workers, and that's bad for business. Besides, if you feel you really have something to hide, it might be because you're doing something that's actually inappropriate.
- Keep the PDA PC: No doubt it's confusing when work and love are all jumbled together, but the only thing you should get caught "making" at

work is more money for your company. People might overlook a brief holding of hands or polite peck in certain situations, but foolin' around on your boss' desk will bring serious consequences.

- Remember your other relationships: You may be dating one of your colleagues, but you're still working with many more. You stand to score big professionally if you continue to demonstrate generosity and care with everyone and hold your significant other accountable as a consummate professional instead of playing favorites.
- Take it to the next level: Congratulations if work brought you and your partner together, but it will take much more to stay together. Take care to not let the office overrun conversation when you're off the clock, and proactively seek other passions you can share. Mutual devotion to all kinds of hobbies and community causes has been known to make couples fall in love all over again!

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