

Is workplace romance OK?

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The internet has blurred the lines between work, public and private spaces.
Credit: Thinkstock

New ways of working mean employers are rethinking the way they manage workplace romance. While some would still prefer that staff kept affairs of the heart out of the office, new research shows that others are taking a perhaps more realistic – and even welcoming – approach to

Cupid.

"The workplace is a vastly different place to what it used to be, when love was stopped 'at the office door'," says Professor Stewart Clegg, of the Business School at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

"One of the big differences the internet has made is that [work](#), public and private spaces have blurred considerably. Work leaches into private spaces, and private spaces leach into work," he says.

These days we call our managers by their first names, collaborate with colleagues at all hours, and connect electronically in ways that soften social restraints. Meanwhile, the opportunities to find love elsewhere narrow, as our personal networks become smaller and our work hours longer.

What Professor Clegg and international collaborators Miguel Pina e Cunha, Arménio Rego and Joana Story found were four main management responses to [romance](#) at work in the 21st century.

The first is what people might know as a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "This is the traditional approach – just don't get involved," says Professor Clegg. Emotion has no place at work and if it sneaks in the door, the organisation doesn't want to know about it.

The second type is the "legalistic" approach where managers impose explicit "no fraternisation" policies.

In the third approach, organisations encourage a "general, pluralistic love for all" and see this intense closeness as an important ingredient in inspiring performance, says Professor Clegg.

Then there's the "eroticised" approach where romance is seen as not only

inevitable but desirable. These organisations establish romance-friendly policies and assume staff are sophisticated enough to manage their relationships well.

"Romance is seen as building commitment, as providing additional binding," Professor Clegg says. "If you love your partner and your partner loves you, and you both love your work, the manager's eyes light up."

Being "emotionally tolerant" may also be seen as a way to attract and retain staff, the researchers say. "People may be more willing to work long hours when they participate in networks of interesting and attractive colleagues."

While each approach solves some problems, it also opens up others, including what to do when a [romantic relationship](#) between colleagues breaks down. Things don't always end well. And the critical point is that romance must not cross the line to become sexual harassment.

Robyn Arnott, of Relationships Australia, says while work relationships may be less formal these days, human resources policies and procedures are increasingly complex.

"Add to that the complexity of romantic relationship ups and downs and you can have a quite volatile situation," she says. "The size of the organisation, whether the romance is within one work team, and the positions that the couple hold in the organisation, would all bear on the impact on the wider organisation."

Even with the best intentions, it is difficult to ensure the end of a workplace relationship is uneventful, she says. "You can have your own ideas about professionalism and set out to behave in a certain way but you have no control over the behaviour of your romantic partner."

Professor Clegg says that, as behavioural constraints loosen and lines become even less clearly drawn, it is important for organisations to think about their [approach](#).

They can try to "legislate" romance away but it's hard to see most organisations being able to hold back the forces of nature.

"Organisations have to realise that they are employing people who are not just saints, sinners, sophisticates or innocents but people who will be, at different times, mixtures of all of those categories," says Professor Clegg.

"There has to be some tolerance and understanding. You can't just buy in part of the emotional life of the people in your employ if having emotional involvement becomes an important part of what managers demand from their employees."

Provided by University of Technology, Sydney

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