

What Execs Don't Get About Office Romance

Sexual harassment—and how to deal with it—is well understood by most companies. But now new dangers are being recognized in the ways an office romance affects the people around it. "Hostile work environment" claims, and their financial costs, are just the start.

BY JOHN A. PEARCE II

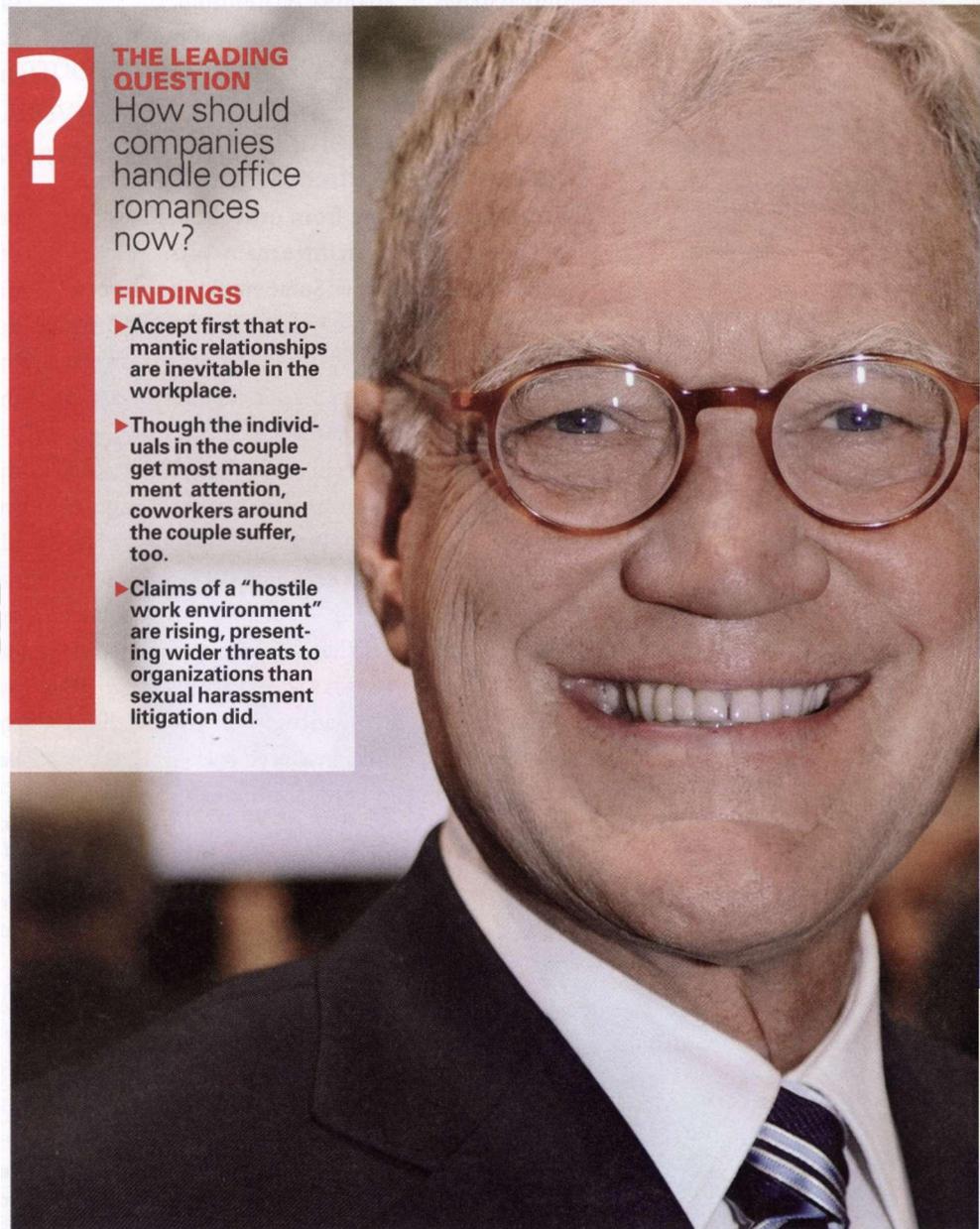
Editor's Note: The following are the opening sections of an article that appears in full online at sloanreview.mit.edu. In these pages, the author calls attention to newly emerging managerial problems posed by office romance.

SHOULD COWORKERS have sex with each other? Should employers try to stop them?

The answer to the first question is that the question isn't worth answering — because office romance is inevitable anyway. The answer to the second is more interesting. And due to recent shifts in the legal climate, for companies, it's also more scary.

There is a misunderstanding at the epicenter of the office romance debate, even as it attracts increasing scrutiny due to famous examples such as the recent episode involving CBS Corp.'s "Late Show With David Letterman" host. Contrary to some commonly misread signals, managers are not interested in stamping out employee dating. Cohesive relationships among employees, including some that become romantic, can help build esprit de corps within the work team and affinity for the company. However, sexual relationships and romances change office dynamics in potentially problematic ways, presenting legal challenges such as allegations about sexual harassment and a hostile work environment, and those challenges need to be managed skillfully.

The recent high-profile revelations about David Letterman's office romances with subordinates in his production company highlight some of the dangers involved in an office romance.



THE LEADING QUESTION

How should companies handle office romances now?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Accept first that romantic relationships are inevitable in the workplace.
- ▶ Though the individuals in the couple get most management attention, coworkers around the couple suffer, too.
- ▶ Claims of a "hostile work environment" are rising, presenting wider threats to organizations than sexual harassment litigation did.

Before addressing the challenges, though, we should recognize just how common and unstoppable office romance is. Surveys provide convincing evidence:

- In a survey by CareerBuilder.com in 2009, 40% of respondents revealed that they have dated a co-worker, with 18% indicating two or more such relationships. An additional 12% are on the sidelines but eager to join the scrum.
- Office romances extend across the age spectrum. Employees between the ages of 35 and 44 are the most likely demographic to date a coworker, with 44% acknowledging that they had done so. In the age group of 55 and older, 34% of employees admitted to having an office relationship.

If employees have anything to say about it, office romance will be with us as long as offices are.

The New Management Challenges of Office Romance

Difficulties stemming from office romances can arise for the company in three main ways.

The first one isn't new: Some employees object to being pursued romantically on the job, at some times and by some people. A survey by Vault.com reveals that 38% of employees report that they have received unwanted sexual advances from their coworkers.

The second difficulty in office romance gets less attention: While office romances are stimulating, exciting and energizing for the couple involved, their noninvolved coworkers see these dalliances as destructive for everyone else. A 2008 workplace survey by Steelcase Inc. found that 85% of respondents believe that office romance is a workplace distraction.

Of course, some romances foster good feelings and well wishes. However, everyone knows the key governing fact: Most office romances end, some with lingering awkwardness and animus.

When one member of the couple wishes that the romance could continue and the other does not, the "dangerous liaison" syndrome is likely to disrupt the workplace. Patterns of distrust emerge. Sides are taken. Reputations are damaged. The possibilities of retaliation and retribution lurk in every assignment and evaluation. In fact, the survey published by Lawyers.com found that the fear of reprisal after a romance ends affects 67% of employees.

The third cause for managerial concern is the freshest, and is increasingly posing legal trouble for

businesses. Difficulties for the company arise because many romances, certainly those involving a supervisor and a subordinate, can create resentment among other "third party" subordinates who second-guess the fairness of evaluations and rewards. If favoritism is detected or even suspected, motivation is undermined. The disruption in the workplace deteriorates toward a productivity death spiral — or, equally devastating, a hostile work environment lawsuit.

The recent high-profile revelations about David Letterman's office romances with subordinates in his production company highlight some of the dangers involved in an office romance. On October 1, 2009, Letterman mixed jokes and confessions during his nightly monologue in revealing on his TV program that he had had sexual relationships with multiple members of his 70-person staff.

Questions surfaced immediately. Letterman appears to be an extortion target—but is he also guilty of victimizing his employees through criminal sexual harassment? Will any of his sexual partners decide to pursue legal action? Will they charge that they felt coerced into affairs with Letterman, even if the liaisons appeared to be consensual at the time?

Equally critical, there are questions concerning the impact that Letterman's behavior had on the workplace for all of his employees. Will other employees back their media interview claims with formal charges that their knowledge of Letterman's sexual relationships created a hostile work environment that was biased against them or in which it was difficult to work? Will coworkers bring formal charges that because of Letterman's office romances he showed favoritism toward his sexual partners.

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Editor's Note: See the extended, comprehensive version of this article online at sloanreview.mit.edu. Among its insights, the author tells how to prevent a "hostile work environment" (and its damages).

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