

My Career

File under 'awkward'

SUE GREEN

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COVER STORY

Colleagues and employers often suffer, too, when an office romance ends, writes Sue Green.

A joke shared at the water cooler, eyes meet at the after-work drinks - but is this the beginning of happy ever after, or of an office romance that will end in tears, tarnished career prospects, or even the sack?

Psychologist Meredith Fuller sees the aftermath: "What I see is someone who comes to me in huge distress. A person they love has dumped them, they are in shock or grieving or angry but overwhelming the issue is [the fact] it is causing tremendous problems at work.

"A common scenario is they cannot stop crying, they are struggling to get to work, to get through the day. They are trying to get through the job but something can trigger them: for example, they see that person walk by, get distressed and have to leave the room."

For colleagues this can be upsetting and embarrassing but, if it continues, they may start to feel that person is not pulling their weight, Fuller says.

"If you are seen to be very adult and reasonable about how you compartmentalise the work aspect from your private life, that means that everyone is more comfortable. You then don't start getting an infection where your dear colleagues start feeling miffed on your behalf and that may impact on how these treat that person," she says.

"You get brownie points for showing how wise, mature and brave you are."

An employment lawyer with Slater and Gordon, Yasser Bakri, says his firm has had clients whose jobs have been terminated or who face disciplinary action over a relationship with a colleague.

He says employers contemplating such action should tread carefully or risk a discrimination claim or unfair-dismissal case. "For example, state anti-discrimination legislation in Victoria provides that it is unlawful to discriminate against someone on the basis that they have - or you think they have - engaged in unlawful sexual activity."

But they are on firmer ground if the office romance affects job performance - long lunches or leaving early, for instance.

Bakri says it's not common for companies to blanket-ban relationships between employees, but some try to regulate them - for example, between managers and their staff. This might be reasonable as a means of avoiding performance issues or appearance of favouritism.

A [University of Melbourne](#) senior lecturer in public policy, Dr **Lauren Rosewarne**, says "anti-fraternisation policies" mostly arise as a means of avoiding sexual harassment. They are there to safeguard the employer: "The fact that this exists is 90 per cent of the battle," she says.

"The employer can say, we have this in place, you have done the wrong thing. If they need a reason to fire people, they have this fallback."

Employers may give other reasons - avoiding distractions in the office, not making other employees feel excluded, possible loss of productivity, cliques forming - but they are difficult to measure.

"What is less difficult to measure is what happens when the relationship goes awful and you have now got two people who don't like each other in the workplace."

That can lead to sexual harassment, bullying accusations (especially if there is a power disparity in the relationship), and what the Victorian legislation calls a "hostile environment" - a workplace with an atmosphere that makes people feel excluded and uncomfortable, Rosewarne says.

She says while some employers outlaw fraternising, others, such as the [University of Melbourne](#), say it is acceptable as long as it is declared, particularly if there is a power disparity. But this trust system is not straightforward. "Doing something that is not OK with your employer potentially makes it more exciting," Rosewarne says.

And what constitutes a relationship? Is it a few nights out together? Is it the first time you have sex? And what if the two lovers don't see it the same way?

"If you are going to your employer, you would imagine that this relationship is very serious, as opposed to a drunken Christmas party fumble," Rosewarne says. "If both of you are on a different page, 'Let's take this to HR' could be a make-or-break situation."

Fuller says a key decision is who those involved tell: no one, making themselves fair game for rumours and leaving close colleagues to feel betrayed; managers and a few trusted co-workers; or "Let's tell everyone because we are so excited" - which is inappropriate.

And, Fuller says, those having the relationship should discuss how to proceed if it ends. "If there is to be an end, how might you negotiate your way round that together so you are not doing any harm to yourselves, your colleagues or your work environment?" she says. "If you cannot have that conversation, that is a bit of a red light."

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