How to Date (Responsibly) at Work

It’s more and more common, and your boss might even be fine with it. But that doesn’t mean an office romance is easy. Some survival tips to stay sane—and employed!

By Kat Stoelfel

Sarah, a 30-year-old graphic designer, met Matt through a colleague at the imaging tech company where they both worked. “I didn’t really notice him at first because he had a beard, and beards weren’t my thing,” she says. But they exchanged a few texts, then graduated to friendly lunches. Eventually Matt asked Sarah on a date, and they talked for so long that the sushi restaurant had to kick them out. “We took things slowly because we were both very aware that we worked in the same office,” she remembers. But the caution was worth it: Five years after that first date, he proposed.

A decade ago their romance would have been expressly forbidden. (You know the old saying about not, um, making a mess where you eat.) But as more Americans postpone marriage until their careers are established—and as hours get longer, with smartphones blurring work and play—it makes sense that attitudes are changing. “Older generations saw work as a separate place,” says Renee Cowan, Ph.D., an assist-
tant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio who studies office relationships. "Nowadays work and life are very integrated." In that light, these stats aren't surprising: 37 percent of people have dated a coworker, according to a 2015 survey by CareerBuilder, and 30 percent of those relationships ended in marriage (proving that an office romance is not always a disaster).

Still, dating at work can be a personal and professional minefield. "I hate to be the legal buzzkill here, but these relationships can create problems," says Lisa Green, an employment lawyer and the author of On Your Case. Policies vary from company to company; relationships don't always end well; and two jobs are on the line. So Glamour spoke with real-life office daters and workplace experts to devise the ultimate dating-at-work survival plan. Because seriously, where else are you going to meet someone these days?

No, Really: Avoid the Boss

According to HR consultant Laurie Rueutmam, most written policies prohibit employees from dating only a direct boss or subordinate. Which brings us to a crucial point: Try not to. Experts Glamour spoke with discourage manager-subordinate romances because they create the perception (or reality) of favoritism; in a worst-case scenario, both parties could be fired or dragged through a harassment lawsuit. And women are disproportionately judged for these relationships, whether they're the boss—"With great power comes great responsibility," warns Green—or especially if they're the underling. "Even today a boss-subordinate relationship is viewed as strategic on the woman's part," says Rebecca Chory, Ph.D., who studies workplace interactions at Maryland's Frostburg State University.

Relationships with coworkers at your level or in different departments are less of a headache, and policies tend to reflect that. Nick, 29, was surprised but pleased to be hired by his girlfriend's digital-media company, where several other couples worked together. "The policy seemed to be: If you're dating and still doing your job, we don't care," he says. The truth is, "even if there are rules, people will hook up anyway," admits Green.

"People are out with long knives for the happy couple."

—Lisa Green, employment lawyer

Be Direct

So what to do if you find yourself lusting after the project manager down the hall? Here's the rule: You get only one shot at asking out a coworker. If you ask repeatedly, says Green, you risk creating a hostile work environment for your crush, which can be defined as

harassment. And if a colleague asks you out and won't take no for an answer, that may be harassment, and you should consider talking to HR.

As for the casual hookup? If you make out with someone at the holiday party, bite the bullet and ask about the person's intentions afterward. "I did not ask, and I spent the next six months wondering if every work email he sent was a subtle invitation to get at it again," says Mia, 30, a management consultant in New York. "None were, and my work life would've been better if I'd known that."

Don't Flirt (Too Much)

If you do decide to start a relationship, remember that others will probably pick up on the sparks. As Anna, 27, who dated a coworker for seven months, points out, "It's hard to pretend like you're not dating someone for eight hours a day." But you can do your best to make others comfortable by nixing the "We're so cute" act. "People are out with long knives for the happy couple," says Green. An easy fix is to act professionally and, when you're together, keep the door open. "Otherwise," says workplace consultant Nicole Williams, who married—and later divorced—her boss, "people wonder what you might be planning." Stephanie, 30, a Houston attorney, works with her husband at a law firm, and they obey a strict no-touching policy that he imposed. "He needs, like, three feet of space in the elevator," she jokes. But their co-working is going smoothly as a result.

*Some names and identifying details have been changed.
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—Anna, 27, reporter

Tell Your Company
Another rule of office relationships: If things get serious, disclose. Yes, it’s embarrassing, but you’ll be glad you did. “Reporting a relationship improves your odds of avoiding an awkward situation when word gets out,” says Green. It might even make things easier. Jennifer, 25, an accountant, kept quiet about her relationship—until she and her boyfriend were assigned to the same project. “HR reassigned one of us due to scheduling,” she says. “It actually let us tell people when we were ready, and any stress we felt went away.”

Be Aggressive About Boundaries
It’s natural to think about how an office romance will affect your career, but the fact that you work together will also affect your relationship, so make sure to draw a line between work life and love life. Jessica, 25, an antiques expert who moved across the country and, basically, in with a coworker, eventually realized that the relationship-job combo was dominating her new life. “I hadn’t made any female friends, and I missed that,” she recalls. “We had to sit down and say, ‘We need to spend less time together.’”

And be prepared to stick to those boundaries, even in terrible situations. When Ruettmann was working in corporate HR for Pfizer, she heard rumors that her now-husband’s department was going to be outsourced. “I just shut the hell up,” she remembers. Sounds harsh, but sharing the info could have gotten her fired. Fortunately, their relationship survived, but it’s a reminder that mixing romance and work can get complicated. “But,” she says, “the heart wants what it wants.”

Prepare an Exit Strategy
The biggest hazard of workplace relationships is the biggest hazard of all relationships: They end. Take Lauren, 28, a video editor who secretly dated a coworker for weeks. He flaked on a weekend getaway, then stopped texting. You could call it ghosting, except she sees him every day in the office kitchen. “It’s so distracting,” she says. The takeaway: When two careers are tangled, a what-if plan is key. “You have to have the conversation about what happens if you break up,” says Williams. Then reality-check yourself. “If someone ends up quitting, it’s often the woman, because men aren’t as worried about post-breakup drama,” notes Williams. “You have to ask, What if I do have to quit?”

Don’t Forget to Enjoy It
There is good news. When workplace dating goes well, it goes really well. Happily coupled-up workers have reported higher job satisfaction, says Cowan. And the office is surprisingly a great place to vet a future partner. “You can learn a lot about someone’s temperament and goals,” says Williams.

Plus, sometimes you can fall in love even more when you watch someone excel. Nick, the digital-media editor who dated a colleague, now works somewhere else, but he left with an intense appreciation for his girlfriend. “She’s doing the job she’s always wanted, and she’s super good at it,” he says. “I’m in awe of her.”

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