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Romantic Relationships in Organisational Settings: Attitudes on Workplace Romance

in the UK and US

Key words: workplace romance, company policy, employee and manager romance,

workplace sexuality

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Purpose: Research illustrates that workplace romance is on the rise and has potentially negative and beneficial consequences. This study aimed to understand from an individual manager and employee perspective in the UK and US, what personal experience individuals had on workplace romance and what this meant to them personally and in terms of company policy.

Design/methodology/approach: A thematic analysis approach was taken to understand what experiences individuals had on workplace romance and how this experience should be reflected in company policy. The research utilised qualitative interviews which were preferred over other methods, such as focus groups by the participants. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded to formulate themes in the research.

Findings: The sample consists of 21 employees and 15 managers from Maryland, Oregon, Pennsylvania and England. Regardless of whether participants were from the United States or England, their opinions were similar. Managers and entry level employees feel that workplace romance was acceptable if it has minimal impact on the workplace. Managers and entry level employees are most concerned with the negative impacts of workplace romance on the atmosphere of the workplace more so than the risk of sexual harassment lawsuits. Managers and entry level employees agree on the importance of companies having a policy on how workplace romance will be handled.

Practical implications: Both managers and employees stress that company policy should not place a complete ban on workplace romance; that workplace romances should be handled on a case by case basis.

Originality/value: This qualitative study aims to add to existing research by comparing managers' and entry level employees' perceptions of consensual romantic relationships between people who work for the same organisation.

Classifications: Research paper

Introduction

Since the mid 1970s researchers have been interested in exploring romantic relationships at work. Sexual behaviour in the workplace is a widespread occurrence nowadays. Indeed, the organisational romance seems to be an increasing phenomenon continually discussed in both trade professional and academic journals. Early work in this area such as Gutek (1985) had negative connotations demonstrating how organisations had difficulty in responding to sexualised behaviour especially if this resulted in legal harassment claims. Nevertheless, the issue of romantic relations at work has not gone away and should be given close attention if organisations are to be equipped in sensitively dealing with the phenomenon (Hearn & Parkin, 1987; Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2004).

Research on romance in organisations

Sexual and romantic relationships at work may affect worker relations and productivity (Mainiero, 1989). However, there is research that suggests that the office romance can increase productivity, improve work climate and culture (Quinn, 1977); add excitement, enhance communication, stimulate creativity and lead to higher job satisfaction (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis 1996).

Mainero (1989) goes as far as to say that workplace romance marks 'a new sexual revolution'. The workplace is becoming increasingly recognised as a sexual environment (Riach & Wilson 2007; Morgan & Davidson 2008). This is especially true as more and more women are not only entering the workforce (Hoffman, Clinebell, & Kilpatrick 1997; Neugarten & Shafritz 1980) but taking on managerial roles (Devine & Markiewicz 1990; Fagenson 1993; Jones 1999; Powell 2001). Indeed, Powell (2012) commented that the role of women in the workplace has expanded steadily worldwide. In the USA, for instance, Powell (2012) found that 47 percent of the labour force were women in 2010 compared with 39 percent in 1973.

Workplace romance can be defined as some form of intimate relationship between two employees who have both expressed their romantic feelings in the form of dating or other intimate association (Foley & Powell, 1999; Mainiero, 1986; Quinn, 1977). Workplace relationships are defined as mutually desired relationship between two people at work, in which some element of sexuality or physical intimacy exists (Powell & Foley, 1998). For the purposes of this study, workplace romance is defined as occurring when two people within the same organisation acknowledge and act on their mutual romantic and/or sexual attraction in the form of sexual intimacy or dating.

Sexuality and organisations

Riach and Wilson (2007) also explain that the workplace is sexualised in terms of gender, sexuality, and power. Sexuality in the workplace has not only become a type of interactive identity formation but also a way of communicating and politics (Biggs, 2010; Riach & Wilson 2007). Indeed, Biggs (2010) described in an industrial example how one consultant actively used her sexuality to gain a profitable internal consultant position within a client firm. The individuals involved with this matter then left the organisation with one pushed and the other leaving voluntarily. Biggs (2010) listed two further examples of where this happened in the World Bank and in the UK's Inland Revenue. Whether this is acceptable or not is not the remit of this paper. However, how organisations deal with this sensitive topic is important (Hearn & Parkin 1987).

Many individuals often meet their partners in the workplace. Longer work hours are placing men and women together for greater amounts of time while also increasing interaction between and dependence on each other (Anderson & Fisher 1991; Hoffman, Clinebell & Kilpatrick 1997). This has also been facilitated by intense interpersonal relations at work, sharing of common interests and by a blurring of home / work interface (Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2004). Increased interaction between men and women leads to increased possibilities for romantic or sexual encounters (Dillard 1987; Paul & Townshend 1998).

Sexuality will never be completely absent from the workplace (Civil 1998; Lee 2006), and wherever there is a workplace, there may be workplace romance (Gomes, Owens, & Morgan 2006). Kakabadse & Kakabadse (2004) argued that understanding workplace intimacy is essential in creating sensitive policies that can address the issue. Firm guidance on interpersonal relations at work for managers may aid them prepare for sensitive encounters (Bowes-Sperry & Powell 1999; Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2004). Nevertheless, little is known about this organisational phenomenon (Riach & Wilson 2007). This may be as individuals want to keep it secret for reasons of privacy or if promotional status or salary increase has been a result of the encounter (Biggs, 2010).

Workplace romance is important as an area of study because it gives insight into common social-sexual behaviour at work (Brown & Allgeier 1995) which is not frequently studied (Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2004; Riach & Wilson 2007). The hallmark of workplace romance is the relatively high levels of mutual intimacy and sexual attraction (Mainiero 1993; Witteman 1993).

Despite arguments that the workplace can be a sexual environment (Riach & Wilson 2007; Morgan & Davidson 2008), Schultz (2003) argued the shared belief in American society is that the workplace is not only rational but asexual. Sex in the workplace; therefore, is considered both literally and functionally inappropriate (Riach & Wilson 2007). The idea of the asexuality of the workplace stems from the view that sexuality is beyond the bounds of professionalism and to be professional means to keep work and sex – and/or romance- separate (Schultz 2003). Bringing love into the workplace interjects an irrational emotion into a place founded on rationality (Schultz 2003). In fact, romance has long been thought of as having nothing to do with work: 'The workplace is not designed to accommodate people falling in love. Love is an irrational emotion; the workplace is . . . built on a foundation of rationality' (Schultz 2003). This view is shared in other countries. For example, Morgan & Davidson (2008) speculate that although sexual attraction cannot be controlled, if asked,

most people in the United Kingdom would say that their understanding of workplace etiquette would guide their behaviours away from office romances (Morgan & Davidson 2008).

It has long been thought that not only should sexuality remain out of the workplace, but those who allow it to enter should be disciplined (Schultz 2003). This is not a view that is changing quickly in spite of the increase in occurrences of workplace romance (Mainiero 1989). Mead (1978, p54) defines society's basic taboos as "the deeply and intensely felt prohibitions against 'unthinkable' behaviour" and workplace romance is still very much one of these taboos (Mainiero 1989).

According to the literature, the workplace appears to be very conducive to the development of romantic or sexual relationships (Mainiero 1989; Neugarten & Shafritz 1980; Paul & Townshend 1998; Pierce, et al., 1996; Powell 2001; Riach & Wilson 2007; Schaner 1994).

This study aimed to understand from an individual manager and employee perspective in the UK and US, what personal experience individuals had on workplace romance and what this means. The research sought to investigate how romantic relationships in the workplace are discussed and defined in different cultural settings, in particular to view how conceptualisations of workplace romances are construed by managers and entry level employees.

Methodology

Participants

The sample of 21 entry level employees and 15 managers was derived from workers in varying industries including: research, government, army, media, legal services, administrations services, health care, customer service and others. No particular industry dominated the sample. Participants who volunteered for the study were located in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Oregon, California in the US and in a number of counties throughout England such as Gloucestershire. No discernable differences were noted between the participants and their geographical location. The gender split between the participants was equal with 18 males and 18 females taking part in the study. 27% of the managers and 25% of entry level employees worked for organisations that had specific nonfraternisation policies. The mean age for managers was 46 and for entry level employees was 29 years of age. There were no differences found between participants from the United States and the United Kingdom so both were used as a homogenous sample.

Design

An interview based methodology was chosen as the most suitable research method for this project. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Friends of the lead researcher were first contacted and they suggested further individuals who were interviewed. The aim of the interviews was to research experiences and expectations by introducing topics and inviting discussion. This was a qualitative study investigating perceptions of workplace romance. Interview times ranged from fifteen minutes to an hour depending on how comfortable participants were with speaking on the topic. First information regarding the participants' age, job level, and type of job was collected to act as a point of comparison. Other questions regarding perceptions of workplace romance and specific types of workplace romance including hierarchical relationships (i.e. an employee dating a boss), homosexual workplace romances, and

romances where participants are on an equal level in the organisation were asked to get the participants views on specific topics should they not come up naturally. The interview also contained questions on the specific experiences of workplace romance participants. Information about local counselling facilities was available to offer in the instance of the interview evoking a negative reaction in the participants.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out on a face to face basis. They were loosely structured in order that participants could raise the issues which they saw to be significant. The face to face nature of the interviews was important to facilitate what the participant wanted to discuss using their own language and terminology. The discussion was facilitated by a researcher and notes were taken by an additional person. The interview method was particularly valuable to this research project. The interaction between researcher and participant encouraged an open dialogue developing the ideas and recommendations in dealing with workplace romance.

Data Analysis

The qualitative researcher is faced with a choice of options when it comes to analysis. For the purpose of this analysis, the researcher chose to undertake a Content based analysis. The interview was taped but the tape was used primarily to verify specific quotes and to transcribe any oral summaries made at the end of the interview process. If more rigorous analysis is needed, the tape was available for transcription. The researcher utilised the tapes where possible, specifically with the aim of teasing out key quotes to support the topic areas emerging from the field note comments.

A thematic analysis procedure was used to analyse the qualitative data collected from the interviews. First, for each content area, one of the researchers reviewed all the applicable comments from note-based transcripts (field notes) and grouped those that were similar in meaning. Once the comments were grouped the resulting 'content areas' were then named

to provide a label to capture the meaning reflected in the grouped comments. The next step involved the other research team members being given the names of the identified dimensions and re-categorising each of the comments into the appropriate dimensions. Where there was disagreement, reasons for classification were discussed and the researchers came to an agreement regarding how most accurately to categorise the comments. Sometimes new dimensions were created and others were collapsed into additional dimensions in order to reduce the data. Dimensions were narrowed and collapsed together in order to group comments with similar underlying themes. As interest was in common experience out lying comments were deleted from the analysis.

Further to this, the thematic analysis procedure also included the use of frequency counts. *Frequency counts* are used to weight each of the 'content areas'. They are useful in qualitative research, as they can indicate which content areas were the most pressing and firmly advocated by the focus group participants. In addition to this, the use of thematic analysis tables (which include frequency counts) can further indicate content areas of less importance or those that were rarely mentioned by the groups.

For the purpose of this analysis the researcher focused on the content and the frequency of reference to a topic area as illustrated in the field notes. Through this data reduction process, themes and factors emerged highlighting trends and patterns.

Results

No overall differences between the UK and the US could be determined with the dataset. Nevertheless, several themes common to both countries could be identified through the interviews. Table 1 demonstrates the codes generated from the 35 interviews.

Many participants interviewed shared the belief in that 40% of managers and 14% of entry level employees expressed that workplace romance in inevitable or as this entry level participant stated, a product of socialisation:

> *People spend so much of their time at work and don't want to feel like they are wasting their lives. Humans are social beings and even though they follow certain expectations and norms, they shouldn't feel like they aren't being themselves. Discouraging socialisation in order to increase productivity and efficiency often has the opposite effect. People don't want to feel like robots. (entry level employee).*

However inevitable workplace romance may be, 40% managers and 42% entry level employees felt it should always be discouraged, a view consistent with previous findings suggesting that workplace romance is often viewed unfavourably.

In this study, however, only 20% of managers and 23% of entry level employees expressed sexual harassment litigation as a concern. The individuals in this study expressed far more concern for workplace distress including gossip, perceived or real favouritism, distraction, and discomfort of employees. In fact, workplace distress was expressed as a concern by 100% of managers and 100% of entry level employees. An example of this concern can be seen in the following dialogue from one of the interviews with an entry level participant:

> *I don't think that anyone working together should be romantically involved. It creates distraction, favouritism, nepotism, special rules for certain people, excluding of other employees, and it unnecessarily affects the business environment. I quit my last job because my manager hired her on/off boyfriend and I just wasn't willing to stick around and deal with that because I knew that it was just going to be drama drama drama. I wouldn't want to work somewhere where there was romance going on in the workplace. I think it's completely and totally unprofessional. (entry level employee).*

An additional negative impact of workplace romance was revealed in an interview with another entry level employee. While in a workplace romance, although she was the lead for a project, she struggled to assert her authority over the person she was seeing:

> *I was working closely on some projects with a co-worker [I was seeing], and he was slacking on our projects for which I was a lead. It was frustrating to ask him to work on the projects. I felt that I might have to start bribing him. Fortunately, that did not happen and the issue resolved on its own.(manager)*

Both entry and managerial level participants of this study felt that the best scenario for a workplace romance involves the least amount of interaction during work hours to minimise workplace distress. They viewed more favourably a relationship between two people of different departments where interaction is minimal. 80% of managers and 81% of entry level employees even went so far as to say that workplace place romance between equals is entirely acceptable provided there is minimal interaction and it does not interfere with work:

> *I suppose that the single deciding factor should be whether or not the   workplace romance has an effect upon the atmosphere or productivity of the office.... Given that, it is hard to generalise. Different people manage things very differently. If, for example, the romance is kept entirely private and cultivated outside of work, then this isn't a problem whatsoever. However, if it begins to affect working practices of those involved, or annoy others in the office, then this is clearly unacceptable (manager).*

 Similarly, several expressed the view that the negative impact of workplace romance can be minimised if people act responsibly and professionally. Many explained that professionalism means staying focused on the job and not letting a relationship interfere with the workplace.

> *I think that workplace romance shouldn't be supported or discouraged. Instead it shouldn't be labelled or treated in any which way. So long as it doesn't interfere with the work performance of the individuals involved, the issue should not be addressed. Work and romance are separate entities and should be treated that way so long as the individuals involved are conducting themselves professionally and appropriately (manager).*

 The importance of professionalism and/or keeping love and work separate was a view expressed by 73% of managers and 43% of entry level employees interviewed in this study.

> *Workplace romance is fine so long as it does not interfere with work, performance, and the quality of life at the office. In other words, no PDA [public displays of affection], no constant flirting and talking, no drama, leave your issues at home. Others should really not be able to overtly tell they are romantically involved. They should remain professional at all times (entry level employee).*

Although several participants expressed that while on the job professionalism comes first, 53% of managers and 24% of entry level employees also said they would choose romance over work if it came down to that decision:

> *… who knows about the future? I may meet a man at work that is perfect for me. Should I dismiss a chance at happiness, because we happen to work together? No. I work to live. I don't live to work. And if work starts to have that much impact on the rest of my life, then I am in the wrong job. (entry level employee).*

Not only would several participants choose romance over their job, but many participants expressed feeling that the workplace is the best way to meet a partner. One manager even expressed that there is no "better pool, if you will, of social contacts.

Homosexual workplace romances were not seen as a primary concern. 60% of managers and 62% entry level employees felt that homosexual workplace romances should be treated exactly the same as heterosexual workplace romances. At the same time, 40% of managers interviewed did consider homosexual workplace romances as less acceptable than heterosexual workplace romances while only 9% of entry level employees shared this view confirming research issue 3. While no manager outwardly expressed a personal problem with homosexual workplace romances, those finding them less acceptable explained that due to the comfort level of the other staff, homosexual workplace romances may disrupt the working environment more so than heterosexual workplace romances:

> *As a manager, [homosexual workplace romances] are especially difficult. I do not want to deny the right to romance to homosexuals anymore than heterosexuals. However, I think that homosexual relationships may pose more problems than heterosexual relationships depending on the work climate. In tolerant climates there is no issue and homosexual relationships should be treated the same as heterosexual relationships. However in very conservative climates, perhaps it is more important for employees to be separated or work in different rooms to ease the comfort of the organisation as a whole (manager).*

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Allowing workplace romances to occur increases the risk for infidelity and adultery was only expressed as a concern by 6% of managers and 5% of entry level employees. However, the concerns regarding hierarchical workplace romances are consistent with explicit. Hierarchical workplace romances were viewed as problematic by 100% of the managers interviewed in this study and 62% of the entry level employees.

In this study, both managers and employees were primarily concerned with the issue of favouritism on the part of the superior and less so the motives of the subordinate. Participants worried that the subordinate would get preferable treatment even if it was unintentional:

> *A good example is work where the employee's pay is commission based. Um, real estate. If one of the agents is dating the boss and gets sent to the big bids over the other employees, then fuck. Here comes conflict. The agent who was sent might be the best one for the job or have the most experience but none of that will matter to the person who isn't fucking the boss and isn't getting sent out to get the big score. Sex, the illusion of sex, the possibility of sex, and the probability of sex screws up everything especially rational thought. It's strange really. We understand so little of a process we are all apart of (manager).*

Similarly, in terms of career gains, participants were more concerned with the reputation of the subordinate using such phrases as "sleeping your way up" than the employee's actual actions, intentions, or motives. In addition many participants felt it necessary in the case of a hierarchical romance for a third party to take over supervising the lower level employee thus limiting the risk of favouritism and abuse of power.

Most participants felt that people enter workplace romance because of genuine attraction, falling under the love motive. Participants felt that one of the dangers of workplace romance is that others will perceive a genuine interest to be one of the ulterior motives such as the power motive. In fact out of all the participants interviewed, only one entry level employee suggested that people actually enter workplace romances for purposes of job benefits.

Meanwhile, perceptions of such from others was a concern for 27% of managers and 14% of entry level employees.

In terms of motivations for flirting, one female entry level employer expressed the following: "If workplace romance includes flirting, I think that as long as both parties are willing participants, that is always fun."

Many entry level employees did state the opinion that their dating choices were "not the company's business." However they expressed more concern regarding their right to choose than their right to privacy. Although many believed in the importance of having a policy in place, 80% of managers and 72% of entry level employees felt it was unfair to have a policy which completely prohibited all workplace romances. The following dialogue from an entry level participant in the study exemplifies such view:

> *If there is a strict policy against romance, the two co-workers would simply try and hide their closeness. Or the policy might lead to gender segregation if members of the opposite sex are unfairly accused of or even just questioned about a possible romance simply because they become friends. I think standardized policies are often unfair. Instead of assuming that dating equates to a poor work ethic and a decrease in the quality or amount of work performed, the company should be open to romances that might prove beneficial to teamwork and morale.*

Two entry level employees went so far as to say such a policy actually decreases their organisational commitment. In addition, 73% of managers and 33% of entry level employees also expressed the view that there should not be a policy requiring individuals to disclose their workplace romance. Disclosure of a workplace romance should be at the discretion of those involved. At the same time 33% of managers and 24% of entry level employers felt that employers had the right to include that requirement in the policy in the case of hierarchical workplace romances.

Disruption of work was a concern for all managers and entry level employees interviewed. Similarly, 80% of managers and 57% of entry level employees expected companies to separate workers when a workplace romance is problematic, and as a last resort, to fire

someone after all other possible solutions have been exhausted. Despite this being the case, 27% of managers explained they would rather not know about a workplace romance suggesting that not having to act would be the preferred scenario.

80% of managers and 81% of entry level employees felt that workplace romance is acceptable provided it does not interfere with work. Not a single manager or entry level employee felt that employers should ban all workplace romances. In addition, 93% of managers and 57% of entry level employees felt that workplace romances could potentially benefit the workplace in ways such as teamwork and higher morale if the relationship was going well:

> *… more and more businesses are realising the value of teamwork. Social time should not interfere with employees doing their work but I think it does have an important role in the workplace. Like, if people at work know each other on a more personal level, they would be more comfortable making suggestions or throwing out new ideas. They would probably be more willing to help each other, and that could make morale higher and then there might be lower turnover. Because employees have lives outside of work, their satisfaction with their job could translate to positive PR for the company. (entry level employee).*

A few other unanticipated themes arose. For example, almost all participants in this study stressed the importance of looking at each workplace romance individually and taking everything on a case by case basis.

> *I have not been in a workplace relationship or known or worked with anyone who has been, but generally I would say that I don't support it or think that it should be allowed. I think if I were faced with the situation, I would discourage it, but it would depend greatly on the individuals involved and the situation. (entry level employee).*

Furthermore, at least half of all participants in the study (53% of managers and 52% of entry level employees) felt that workplace romances are more acceptable in certain types of work. For example, several people felt that workplace romance does not have as negative an impact at places with a high turnover rate such as food service and retail, as this entry level participant dialogue reveals:

I think food service and retail could have less restrictions since it is unlikely that employees will stick around long enough to be promoted, which would lead to an issue with the power dynamics. Also if the romance doesn't work out, employees are more likely to deal with the situation themselves, possibly by quitting, then to feel stuck in an uncomfortable situation. While an employee who has been with a company for a while would hesitate to give up the status they've built up.

Others areas where people perceived workplace romance to be more acceptable included large companies where it would be easy enough to transfer someone. People also mentioned companies where romance is unlikely to interfere with work such as in landscaping: "Say they are landscapers. I don't think a personal relationship is going to get in the way of weeding and planting" (See Table 2).

INSERT TABLES 1 & 2 HERE

Discussion/Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research in several ways. Gomes, Owens, and Morgan (2006) stated that wherever there is a workplace, there will be workplace romance, which has been mirrored by other authors (Hearn & Parkin, 1987). Nevertheless, inevitable how workplace romance may be, participants felt it should always be discouraged. This view is consistent with previous findings suggesting that workplace romance is often viewed unfavourably (Mano & Gabriel 2006) especially if it leads to sexual harassment claims (Bowes-Sperry & Powell 1999).

Interestingly, some of the concerns expressed in previous research were not shared by the participants of this study. Mano and Gabriel (2006) suggested that one of the main reasons for discouraging workplace romance is out of fear of sexual harassment litigation. In this study, minimal participants expressed sexual harassment litigation as a concern. The individuals in this study expressed far more concern for workplace distress including gossip, perceived or real favouritism, distraction, and discomfort of employees. In fact, workplace distress was expressed as a concern by both managers and entry level employees.

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An additional negative impact of workplace romance was revealed by the study with regard to control and supervision. This concern is consistent with Grayson's (2007) explanation of incompatible relational expectations.   Both entry and managerial level participants of this study felt that the best scenario for a workplace romance involves the least amount of interaction during work hours to minimise workplace distress. They viewed more favourably a relationship between two people of different departments where interaction is minimal. The importance of professionalism and/or keeping love and work separate was a view expressed by those interviewed in this study. This view was described by Schultz (2003) as the asexuality of the workplace. Schultz (2003) argued that the workplace is meant to be asexual and rational and is therefore not a place for romance. As mentioned, participants agreed with Schultz (2003) in stressing the importance of keeping this separation of work and romance. However, unlike Schultz (2003), participants believed it was possible to be in a workplace romance yet still keep this separation through acting professional, leaving issues "at home," and keeping the romance a private matter.

This is consistent with speculations by Morgan and Davidson (2008) who proposed that while at work, people in the United Kingdom would act according to their understanding of workplace etiquette as opposed their sexual feelings. Although several participants expressed that while on the job professionalism comes first, managers and entry level employees also said they would choose romance over work if it came down to that decision:

There are several implications of this research for employers. First, the findings suggest that individuals may feel more committed to an organisation if it does not prohibit workplace romance. However, the findings also suggest the importance of having a policy in effect stating that workplace romance should have little impact on the work environment. If the relationship does negatively impact the work environment, employers should first separate the two to minimise interaction at work before termination becomes an option, in the instance of a workplace romance, employers have the right to intervene should the relationship

interfere with work productivity. Given that, the findings also suggest that the first course of action for managers should employees be engaging in a problematic workplace romance is to discuss the situation privately with the participants. Managers should work with the workplace romance participants to find a solution which works for the management and the employees. Only after all else fails should termination be an option.

In addition the policy should not require individuals to disclose their workplace romance especially as 73% of managers and 52% of entry level employees considered this to be unsafe. Lastly, if two people are discovered to be engaging in a hierarchical relationship, there should be a third party to supervise lower level employee.

This research challenges the idea of negative stigma of workplace romance by discovering several benefits experienced by the individuals in the study. Many managers and entry level employees felt that workplace romances can create more relaxed and happier work environments. Others say that workplace romances have motivated them to work harder and have increased their commitment to the organisation.

Implications for policy

In the USA, many organisations have generally chosen to condemn such activity and have introduced 'Love Contracts' which are clauses that either deter inter-office relationships or prohibit them entirely. Extensive policies have also been introduced to regulate or suppress sexual and romantic relationships. It is questionable as to whether expressions of sexuality in the workplace can be regulated and suppressed through moral legislation and such policies may be counter-productive as individuals are forced into a secrecy culture. It might be viewed that sexual and romantic relationships at work are the norm and so we should not discriminate against staff in such relationships just because they (the relationships) might create difficulties.

In contrast, a more positive approach has been taken in the UK, depending on the specific industry, condoning policy is implemented which is fair and accepts that workplace relationships will happen and encourages employees to be open about them. Issues that arise as a result of romantic relationships can be dealt with professionally and legally, perhaps by allocating the individuals engaged in such relationships to different teams or departments. Often open and well communicated 'Conflicts of Interests' policies are utilised by organisations. But as employees may be secretive about their behaviour or work in a culture of secrecy (Biggs, 2010), it may be difficult for such policies to be implemented effectively. The IRS Employment Trends Research in 2000, noted that only 20% of organisations have formal codes of behaviour concerning such matters and so perhaps organisations need to continue to think about the implications and likely impact of sexual and romantic relationships in the workplace by undertaking risk assessment which aims to identify what areas of the business might need protecting (See Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3

Limitations

Due to the nature of qualitative research, there is no way to determine if the views represented here can be applicable to a wider population. Trust was an important aspect of this research ensuring that the participant felt safe discussing sensitive matters with the female interviewer. Nevertheless, the advantage of qualitative research is that it is equally led by the participants. The result of this is that this paper has uncovered issues not fully discussed in the literature. One example of this is that many participants in this study felt workplace romance is more acceptable in certain areas of work. Another example is that this research revealed the need to evaluate issues on a case by case basis. Romantic relationships between colleagues that have no work interests with each other may be more acceptable than sleeping with the boss or client to get promoted. Research in this area is

notoriously difficult due to the subject matter. However it needs to continue especially if

organisations are to create policies that are sensitive to adult behaviour.

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TABLE 1: Most popular codes generated through the interviews

Code	Number of Managers (N-15) with this opinion	Number of Entry Level Employees (N-21) with this opinion
Workplace romances are problematic when they are hierarchical.	15	13
Workplace romances cause distress at the workplace including gossip, real or perceived favouritism, drama, and tension.	15	21
Workplace romances can potentially benefit the workplace.	14	12
All companies should have a policy regarding workplace romance.	12	15
Employers should intervene by separating participants of romance or by termination.	12	12
Employers should NOT prohibit workplace romance.	12	12
Workplace romance is acceptable provided that it does not interfere with work/or and interaction is minimal.	12	17
Disclosure of workplace romance is up to the individuals involved.	11	7
Individual would not feel safe disclosing a workplace romance or feels it is best not to disclose.	11	11
Professionalism is key to whether or not workplace romance will be problematic. Employees need to maintain a level of professionalism: Professional and personal lives to be kept separate.	11	9
Homosexual relationships should be treated the same as heterosexual relationships.	9	13
Managers should work with individuals to come up with a solution when workplace romance occurs.	8	8
Workplace romances are more acceptable in certain kinds of work.	8	11
Homosexual workplace romances are less acceptable than heterosexual relationships.	6	2
Workplace romance is inevitable.	6	3
People should be required to disclose when in a workplace romance with a superior.	5	5
The risk of a sexual harassment lawsuit is a major concern.	3	5

TABLE 2: Managers and entry level employees' perceptions on the acceptability of workplace romance in different areas of work

	Work in which workplace romance is more acceptable	Work in which workplace romance is less acceptable
Managers' perceptions	Independent work/self employed	Hierarchical organisations
	University lecturers who lecture separately	Commission based jobs such as real estate
	Principal dating a teacher	Large companies where transferring employees would be easy
	Jobs requiring a large amount of time at work (i.e. doctors and nurses)	
Entry level employees' perceptions	Landscaping	Work in confined places (i.e. on a submarine)
	Doctors and nurses	Marketing
	Bookbinding	Large companies where favouritism is more likely to occur
	Smaller companies owned by partners	Priority based, high stress situations (i.e. hospital work, ambulances, out-in-the-field)
	Food service	Professional office settings
	Retail	High responsibility jobs (i.e. a person is in charge of a team, or one who works in dangerous jobs).

TABLE 3: Questions to answer within the Human Resources Policy

- What aspects of the business needs protecting. (financial exposure, breach of confidentiality, conflicts of interest, team issues, professional distance)

- Is the climate pro-interactive?

- What policy already exists?

- How does 'professional business conduct' translate in practice

- Are the individuals in a superior/subordinate relationship?

- Do any conflicts of interest exist?

- Does one of the parties need to transfer or leave