

Workplace Romance: Employee Heartache and HR Heartburn

PUBLISHED ON

February 4, 2022

While a romantic workplace relationship rocked the media world this week, it also should be a stark reminder for human resources professionals about having proper policies in place for workplace romances.

CNN Worldwide president Jeff Zucker [abruptly resigned on Wednesday](#), prompted by his failure to timely disclose the existence of a romantic workplace relationship he has been having with a CNN marketing executive.

The news of his quick exit reverberated through all levels of media and entertainment. But for HR professionals, the fact that the relationship - which by all accounts was consensual - arose out of the apparent violation of a workplace rule or contract provision requiring the disclosure of a workplace romance is what should be the biggest takeaway.

Employers need to be aware that workplace romances can and do go sour, and can lead to accusations of sexual harassment, hostile work environment discrimination and conflicts of interest. However, research suggests in most circumstances, it's better to *manage* these relationships, rather than attempt to *prohibit* them.

In a 2021 survey, the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that [34% of American workers are, or have been, in a workplace romance](#). At companies that have policies addressing workplace romances, 78% of respondent employees stated they are NOT required to disclose those relationships. Most tellingly, at companies where disclosure is mandatory, 75% of employees have not reported it to their supervisor or HR.

It's impossible to prevent workplace romances, but they can be managed - for the benefit of the employer, the parties in the relationship and the workforce in general. Some policies prohibit romantic relationships between superior and subordinate and for good reason since the "consensual" nature of the personal relationship can get blurred with the power dynamic in the workplace. Other policies require disclosure only. These policies promote transparency and give HR the opportunity to establish and manage expectations of the romantic couple, and at the same time help protect the company from heartburn.

If you have such a policy, it should be reviewed by a qualified employment attorney - especially after the #MeToo scandals that have brought workplace harassment to the forefront. If you don't have a policy for romantic workplace relationships and wish to discuss it with an attorney, please [contact me](#) or any of the attorneys in the [Barley Snyder Employment Practice Group](#).

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