

Yes, Your Valentine Can Sit in the Next Workstation

Dear Stephen:

I met my wife while working at a major manufacturer about 26 years ago. She was the showroom manager, and I was a senior sales rep. We fell in love, got married and now have three grown sons. Our relationship is by no means unique amongst our friends. I have four friends who were sales reps at dealers and married their colleagues. I have found the same thing applies in the design world. It seems I am constantly meeting people who found their spouse through work, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

I was thinking that in general we spend more time at work than we do at home, so it does seem logical for romance to find its way into our working lives — and not just for the young. I know a president of a major company who has to be in his late 60s and who is about to get married to

his southeast regional VP. I have all of these great love stories in my head and with Valentine's Day coming up, I was thinking about all my friends, and then I got a pit in my stomach.

Over the last five or six years, I have felt a growing sense that office romance is discouraged or even affirmatively off limits. I understand and support a pushback against sexual assault and harassment at work, but a consensual relationship is an entirely different story. I find myself concerned that if my wife and I had met under the same circumstances today, our wonderful life together would never have happened. What are your thoughts on this?

From a Fairy Tale



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear From a Fairy Tale,

This is an easy one. Clearly we don't want to live in a world where you and your wife aren't married and happy, but companies have some real and fair concerns about office romance. The upshot is there is no hard or fast rule here. So much of it — as is much of romance generally — is difficult to regulate or control. While it is important that companies do everything in their power to reduce sexual assault and harassment at work, you can't control what your employees get up to after they clock out for the day.

As it stands now, many compa-

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nies have very clear and explicit rules about workplace dating. Some require couples report their relationships, others simply prohibit office romance all together. I tend to be more optimistic about these things (or maybe I'm just a realist). You're quite right to point out workplace romances are only natural and to be expected — where else are busy people supposed to look for love? The tightrope that I'm asking companies to walk is between treating employees like adults and making sure they don't act like children — or boors.

Whenever I talk about workplace romance, I can't help but bring up Bill and Melinda Gates. Together, they have given tens of millions of dollars to charity, changing millions of lives and the world as a whole. Famously, Melinda was a relatively new Microsoft employee when she and Bill were randomly seated next to each other at a company event. In many ways, this sort of relationship is exactly the type that makes companies most nervous: The company CEO has all the power in a relationship

with an employee. And yet, it blossomed into one of the most important unions in the world. Had there been a blanket no-dating policy at Microsoft, this never would have happened.

On the other hand, and in this moment particularly, there is no excuse for not being hyper-aware of power dynamics in romantic relationships at work. Individuals should be very cautious about making romantic advances on colleagues. Companies, for their part, should make expectations of behavior and reporting outlets for harassment clear and accessible. Employees should be confident companies will respond appropriately to complaints and not just have their concerns pushed into a filing cabinet or down a shredder.

There are some companies where office romance is strictly forbidden for legal reasons. In that case, obviously, I would never advocate for striking up a relationship. You have to avoid it if you want to keep your job. That being said, if your company would allow it, let love bloom!

The office romance is by no means dead, but we need to understand courtship must adapt to the realities of our changing world. If you really see yourself being happy with a colleague, see if they would like to join you for dinner or a drink, a real date, and then take it from there. The office is not a place for a cheap hookup. But don't let anything get in the way of your long-term happiness!

If you do end up in a (sanctioned) relationship with a colleague, here are some Viscusi Rules to follow: (1) No PDA. (2) Avoid oversharing details of your romance with colleagues. (3) Don't overdo it on social media. (4) Mix up your lunch time and eat with different people.

Basically, just use common sense. Keep your relationship professional in the workplace and make sure that you can both still succeed. It is fine for you to be happy, but going too far can sometimes leave other colleagues feeling uncomfortable.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Stephen